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**Reduced SBC-funding proposals
pass key Texas Baptist committee**

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Plans to reduce Texas funding to the Southern Baptist Convention passed a key committee Sept. 26 and are headed for final approval by the state convention in October.

The Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas debated but strongly affirmed two separate proposals to alter the way the state group shares funds with the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

One would reduce the amount the BGCT now sends to six SBC seminaries from \$5.3 million to no more than \$1 million. Since funds would be based on the number of students from Texas attending the school, all but one SBC seminary, Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, would be virtually defunded.

A separate measure would eliminate funding for the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and reduce dollars for the SBC Executive Committee to a token \$10,000 a year.

The 200-member Executive Board overwhelmingly approved both recommendations. The seminary-funding measure, first proposed by a study committee, drew opposition from about 25 or 30 members in a standing vote. The other motion, by the Executive Board's administrative committee, passed with about a dozen "no" votes in a show of hands.

Both proposals call for redirecting funds to Texas Baptist ministries. Funds cut from the seminaries would go to three Texas-owned Baptist schools. An estimated \$1.1 million redirected from the Executive Committee and ERLC would be used for "special Texas needs," including church starting among Hispanics, human needs and the state convention's own Christian Life Commission.

The proposals culminate several years of disagreement between conservative leaders of the 15.8 million-member SBC and the moderate-led BGCT, the largest SBC affiliate with some 2.7 million members.

The plan leaves intact, however, Texas funding for the SBC International Mission and North

American Mission boards, two entities that combined receive nearly 73 cents out of every dollar given at the national level to the Cooperative Program unified budget.

BGCT messengers will give final consideration to the budget changes at their annual state-convention meeting, scheduled Oct. 30-31 in Corpus Christi.

SBC leaders have charged that the proposed funding changes are divisive and unilateral and are urging Texas Baptists to oppose the plan. Texas leaders counter that the national group has been unresponsive to state concerns and that fundamentalist SBC schools no longer teach traditional Baptist views. They argue the funds would be better spent on needed ministries in Texas.

The dispute came to a head this summer when the SBC approved a rewrite of its "Baptist Faith and Message" and leaders said it would be used as an instrument of "doctrinal accountability" at seminaries. Texas Baptist leaders have been critical of the rewrite and say it is un-Baptist to use it as a creed.

"I will gladly sign God's word on every page, but I will not allow our people to be put in a position where they will have to sign man's word about God," BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade told the Executive Board. The comment was greeted with sustained applause.

Wade said that "liberalism" -- which served as a conservative rallying cry for reforming SBC seminaries in the 1980s -- "has never been a problem in Texas." He said the budget changes are not to harbor liberals but to guard religious liberty.

"In seeking to eliminate the perceived problem of liberalism, [SBC leaders] have willingly sacrificed liberty," Wade said. "You do not have to sacrifice liberty in order to maintain biblical fidelity. Texas Baptists intend to show the way."

During an hour-long debate over the seminary-funding changes, Executive Board members agreed that major changes have swept the SBC and that conflict exists, but several argued that is no reason to reduce funding to the seminaries.

The problems in the SBC are "impossible to reconcile," said Jim Ginnings, a layman from First Baptist Church of Wichita Falls. Battles between the "extreme right and extreme left," he said, "leave very little place for some of us to go."

Frankie Rainey, pastor of Crestmont Baptist Church in Burleson and an adjunct professor at Southwestern Seminary, said current events in Baptist life have placed him in a dilemma. "I feel like some of the leadership in the SBC curved off to the right and some of the leadership in the BGCT curved off to the left, and I'm left without a denomination."

While findings in the BGCT study-committee report of alleged abuses at SBC seminaries are cause for concern, Rainey continued, he fears students will suffer as a result of the cuts.

Debbie Chisolm, minister to youth at Royal Lane Baptist Church in Dallas, responded that she, too, is concerned about the students. But Texas Baptists should not be expected to fund the education of students at seminaries where the beliefs of Texas Baptists are not represented, she added.

"Our Southern Baptist theological seminaries are not teaching the doctrine Texas Baptists love and support," Chisolm said.

BGCT Treasurer Roger Hall said the state convention would continue its practice of honoring the wishes of churches that still want to direct funds to SBC seminaries. "There will be a continuation of the church-directed or church-choice plan," he explained.

The proposal to reduce funding for the SBC Executive Committee and ERLC drew less debate but did generate some discussion.

In response to a question about the rationale for these changes, Wade briefly described the work of the two entities. The Executive Committee is the central governing body of the SBC and administers a news service, Baptist Press. The ERLC was formed out of the SBC's former Christian Life Commission and also inherited new responsibilities in Washington after the SBC defunded the Baptist Joint Committee in 1991.

"The BGCT has been routinely criticized and critiqued" by the Executive Committee and by Baptist Press, Wade said. "Texas Baptists have been slandered by both these groups."

The ERLC, he added, has become involved in "overt political campaigning" rather than simply making a case for Christian ethics.

Wade said the BGCT first created a Christian Life Commission in Texas 50 years ago, an idea that soon was copied by the SBC. The early and most influential leaders of the SBC's agency came out of Texas, he said.

The current director of the ERLC, Richard Land, "also is a Texan but did not learn his Christian ethics from Texas Baptists," Wade said. He described Land and the current ERLC's agenda as coming from "a different world."

Land was not available for comment, according to an ERLC spokesman.

Several board members spoke passionately about the need to use the redirected money for Texas missions. Others questioned whether taking money from SBC entities to use in Texas would set a dangerous precedent.

Steve Washburn, pastor of First Baptist Church of Pflugerville, asked if the BGCT would be setting a pattern it would encourage associations and churches to follow as well. For example, there are many pressing ministry needs in Austin, he said, so should churches in Austin be encouraged to keep more of their mission money there rather than send it to the BGCT?

BGCT President Clyde Glazener clarified for the board that the two SBC entities to be defunded in this case are not missionary agencies. "None of these funds has anything to do with reaching people around the world," he said.

Southern Seminary President Mohler, however, issued a statement after the Executive Board vote saying Texas Baptists are "on the wrong side of the Great Commission" and have an "uncooperative attitude."

"It is tragic that the BGCT is cutting itself off from the world's most effective and faithful theological seminaries," Mohler said. "It is tragic that the BGCT is willfully cutting the life support going to thousands of God-called ministers of the gospel training in our seminaries."

Morris Chapman, president and chief executive officer of the SBC Executive Committee responded, "We believe the people of the Southern Baptist churches in Texas have not been fully informed of the extreme nature and destructive results of this recommendation."

"Fractious elements in Texas have driven an extremely poor decision that is bad for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, bad for the Southern Baptist churches in Texas, bad for the Southern Baptist Convention and bad for the common mission causes dear to our hearts," Chapman said.

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Texas study-committee head defends group against charges

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Some of the charges leveled against the Texas Baptist committee studying theological education by Southern Baptist Convention officials are "ludicrous," the committee's chairman said Sept. 26.

Houston pastor Bob Campbell, who chairs the Baptist General Convention of Texas Seminary Study Committee, presented the committee's report to the BGCT Executive Board. The report and its recommendations for funding changes were approved by a strong majority vote.

Campbell described five criticisms of the committee's work and responded to each.

First, he responded to criticism by the seminary presidents that the Texas committee did not interview current students or faculty.

When the Texas committee arranged its on-campus visits to each of the seminaries, the presidents were told to "ask anyone you would like" to participate in the meetings, Campbell said. "They chose not to invite a single student."

To say the Texas committee limited student input is "ludicrous," he asserted.

A Baptist Press story, however, pointed out that Campbell did ask the seminary presidents to limit the size of their delegation to the number of Texas Baptist representatives visiting their campus. In one instance that was as few as 11.

Further, the study committee did talk to current faculty, although not in formal on-campus interviews with the presidents listening in, Campbell said. These faculty members felt they "couldn't talk freely" otherwise, he added.

Even so, the questions the study committee wanted answered pertained largely to administrative and trustee decisions, Campbell said. "Faculty and students have very little say in the matters we were studying."

The seminary presidents themselves have not demonstrated an interest in the opinions of students, Campbell added. As evidence, he recalled a statement by Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., during the crisis that led to dismantling the Carver School of Church Social Work there. Mohler told students at the time: "You cannot hold us accountable. That is not your job."

Second, Campbell responded to a Sept. 21 Baptist Press story that said the Texas committee held up as theological role models former professors at SBC seminaries who don't believe the Bible or that Jesus is the only way to salvation.

The article was written by Russell Moore, a student at Southern Seminary. Moore also was the Baptist Press reporter sent to cover this summer's Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly, where he later claimed he was subjected to verbal abuse and physical shoving, charges that have been denied by others present and not substantiated by any eyewitnesses.

Moderate Baptists nationwide criticized Moore's reports from the CBF meeting, which largely focused on controversial issues such as homosexuality that weren't even discussed as official business. His reports also prompted protests from state Baptist newspaper editors, including a complaint from a committee of the Association of State Baptist Papers.

In a Sept. 21 story titled "Texas committee embraces profs who doubt salvation alone in Jesus, Bible's facts," Moore cited Russell Dilday, Molly Marshall, Wilburn Stancil and Alan Neely as examples of individuals embraced by the committee that he implied hold liberal theology.

His reference apparently comes from a footnote in the Texas report that says: "Molly Marshall and Paul Debusman at Southern, Wilburn Stancil at Midwestern and Russell Dilday at Southwestern are representative of the high-handed methods that lack due process or smack of less than fair."

These individuals were cited as "examples of persons who were mistreated," Campbell responded. Neither the committee nor the report endorsed their theology, because that was not the focus of this footnote, he added.

Third, he answered charges that the committee's report is vindictive.

"There is no glee in this report," Campbell said, explaining that his committee agonized over its work and that this was the most unpleasant task he's ever tackled in denominational life.

Fourth, he responded to a Sept. 22 story in Baptist Press that attempted to link the Texas committee to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

That story, titled "Three BGCT seminary committee members also CBF steering committee leaders," was written by Todd Starnes of the Baptist Press staff.

When he read that story, it was "the first time I ever heard CBF mentioned in our work," Campbell said. "This is not a CBF report; this is a report about Texas."

Finally, Campbell responded to a charge by Chuck Kelley, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, that Campbell had misquoted him as saying seminary faculty members could not criticize the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" even in private conversations at an off-campus party.

Campbell acknowledged that he had issued a retraction and apologized to Kelly for the misstatement. The committee was told Kelley made such a comment in a July faculty meeting but did not ask Kelley about it specifically, he said.

The comment is not part of the Texas committee's formal report, however, but was quoted by Campbell in an early presentation of the committee's work.

Even withdrawing that statement does not change the fact that Kelley and the other seminary presidents said their faculty members cannot criticize or question the "Baptist Faith and Message," Campbell said.

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Texas Baptist missions directors ask SBC leaders to compromise

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- In a Sept. 21 meeting requested by leaders of the Southern Baptist Convention, Texas directors of missions urged the 15.8 million-member national body to work out its differences with its largest state affiliate, the 2.7 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas.

In response, a dozen SBC agency heads affirmed the autonomy of Baptist associations and urged directors of missions to emphasize positive aspects of the SBC but offered no specifics for bridging a growing gulf between the nation's largest Protestant denomination and its largest state affiliate.

Instead, SBC leaders adopted a quickly written resolution pledging to "celebrate our partnership with Baptist churches in Texas" and "affirm our eagerness to work with all Texas Baptists through our historic partnership."

Morris Chapman, president of the SBC Executive Committee, called for the two-hour meeting at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Leaders of the BGCT, who are proposing major funding changes for the SBC this fall, were not invited.

Most of the meeting, attended by about 35 directors of missions, consisted of a lively discussion moderated by Chapman, a former Texas pastor and SBC president.

Jack Nivens of Double Mountain Area in West Texas, started the discussion on the deteriorating relationship between the SBC and BGCT by asking: "Are y'all talking to each other?"

Warren Hart of Red River Valley Baptist Association likened the disagreements between the SBC and the BGCT to church members "fussing about the color of the carpet" while bigger problems go unattended.

However, Chuck Kelley, president of New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, charged it is not the SBC, but BGCT leadership, that has caused division.

"The Southern Baptist Convention and its entities did not come to the BGCT and say, 'Let's have a showdown,'" he said.

Instead, Kelley said, "the BGCT is the one" that chose to make the recently revised "Baptist Faith and Message" an issue of fellowship.

Texas leaders have roundly criticized changes in the "Baptist Faith and Message" that they say are unbiblical. They also object to a statement in the preamble describing the faith statement as "an instrument of doctrinal accountability," which critics say violates Baptist tradition by elevating the statement to creed.

Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in North Carolina and immediate past president of the SBC, said Southern Baptist leaders have not refused to "play ball" with those who reject revisions to the "Baptist Faith and Message."

"The problem is the other way," Patterson said, suggesting that Texas leaders are being uncooperative with Baptists who affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message".

Patterson added, however, that the SBC has every right to require its seminary professors and agency employees to affirm the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" as a statement of faith.

Patterson deflected criticisms that the revised "Baptist Faith and Message" has become a creed. "A creed is something a group endorses as a must statement," he explained. "I cannot imagine any Baptist doing that, because we have only one creed, and that's the Bible."

Paul Saylor of Smith Baptist Association asked the SBC leaders why "few or no individuals who are sympathetic to the BGCT are serving on boards and agencies of the SBC."

Chapman paused for a minute, and then said any answer he could give to that question would be "insufficient." The SBC's Committee on Nominations makes those decisions, he said.

Kyle Cox of Galveston Association said he was tired of hearing such accusations. He is a trustee of the SBC's International Mission Board and remains loyal to the BGCT at the same time.

"I am very much in support of the BGCT," he said. "But I feel like BGCT supporters -- not the BGCT -- are pushing me away. ... Please don't assume that because someone is a Southern Baptist they cannot be a Texas Baptist."

Patterson then spoke about his appointments during his two terms as SBC president. He said he did not purposely exclude anyone from the BGCT from leadership. His nominations were limited, however, he said, by a commitment that he "would not knowingly appoint anybody to anything who had any doubts about Scripture."

"In Texas, I was very, very careful, because I was trying to be sensitive to that concern," Patterson said.

He and other recent SBC presidents "have tried to be as fair as we could," he said, but were limited by a commitment that the only people to be placed on SBC boards and agencies should be "people who affirm every syllable of the Bible to be true."

Patterson referred to the doctrine of biblical "inerrancy," which is embraced by the ruling SBC conservative faction but challenged by moderates who call for more latitude in interpreting Scripture.

Several directors of missions said the reason cooperation between the BGCT and the SBC has broken down is because there is a lack of trust.

"I believe the Cooperative Program (the unified budget that simultaneously funds the state and national conventions) I was taught and promoted no longer exists," said Mike Smith of Dogwood Trails Area in East Texas.

"Cooperation is spelled 'trust,'" Horton added. "The reason the situation we're in has come about is because trust has eroded."

Horton alluded to the earlier discussion about Texas representation on SBC governing boards and committees. "It would be very naive" to say this group doesn't know the answer to that question, he asserted. "All of us know that over the last 20 years the appointment process has been used to put people in power."

This has angered some Texas Baptists, and Texas controls of large portion of the money flowing to the SBC, Horton explained.

For the BGCT to withhold funding from the SBC is "very unkind and unchristian, but it's happened because there's a lack of trust," Horton said.

Patterson responded that changes in the SBC over the last 21 years were necessary. "Some things kill," he said, referring to the charge by conservatives that SBC agencies and seminaries had become too liberal.

"What did constitute the beginning of all this ... was a recognition of the fact that there are some things that unless two are agreed they cannot walk together," he said.

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Co-founder of SBC takeover willing to tolerate Calvinism

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The so-called "battle for the Bible" in the Southern Baptist Convention marginalized those who reject biblical inerrancy. However, there is latitude for those who interpret Scripture in different ways, said a former SBC president and co-founder of what has been termed the "conservative resurgence" that removed moderates from power in the nation's largest Protestant denomination during the 1980s.

During a question-and-answer session with directors of Baptist missions Sept. 21 in Fort Worth, Texas, Ron Horton of Creath-Brazos Baptist Association asked Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., about his theology.

"You are often accused of being a five-point Calvinist," he said. "I believe you are my brother in Christ. Do you personally subscribe to what is called five-point Calvinism?"

Mohler responded that he is a "Baptist evangelical by conviction," but asserted that he would "fly my colors boldly."

"If you ask me if I'm a Calvinist, I'm going to have to answer yes," he said. "But that is not the first, second, third or even fourth term I would use."

Instead, he described his beliefs as in the Reformed tradition that he said were in line with those of Southern Baptists at the time of the convention's founding in 1845.

Historians use the acronym "TULIP" to represent the five points characterizing views of the 16th century French reformer John Calvin. The respective letters stand for:

-- T: Total depravity, meaning that humans are so tainted by original sin that they are incapable of improving their status before God.

-- U: Unmerited election, meaning God chooses some for salvation, regardless of good works.

-- L: Limited atonement, meaning that Christ's death on the cross is effective to save only the elect.

-- I: Irresistible grace, meaning that the elect are unable to resist God's call to salvation.

-- Perseverance of the saints, which means that the elect can never fall from grace. It is often stated in Baptist circles as, "once saved, always saved."

Virtually all Baptists would accept some of those views.

In recent years, however, there has been a resurgence of five-point Calvinism among SBC conservatives. Mohler is perhaps the convention's highest-profile Calvinist. Patterson, meanwhile, subscribes to a "modified" Calvinism that mutes tenets seeming to contradict the denomination's strong emphasis on evangelism and became the SBC's predominant view during the 20th century.

When asking whether someone is a Calvinist, Mohler said, "we need to be clear about what the

alternatives are." He said the SBC could in no way be considered fully Arminian, the contemporary counter theology to Calvinism that emphasized free will.

Mohler referred specifically to the doctrines of election and predestination, the two tenets of Calvinism that together assert that God decided before creation who would be saved and who would be damned.

"Every Christian, every Baptist has to believe in predestination," he said at one point. Later, he added: "There's not a person in this room who doesn't believe in limited atonement" -- that Christ's sacrifice on the cross is effective to save only the elect, those whom God predestined for salvation -- opposed to the alternative, which, he said, is universalism, the belief that everyone is saved.

"The difference is in how it is limited," Mohler declared.

Another director of missions asked former SBC president Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., and founder of the conservative movement, what he believes the revised "Baptist Faith and Message" says about the atonement and whether Mohler's theology would fit within those parameters.

The "Baptist Faith and Message" says "Christ died for all" and affirms the Savior's substitutionary atonement on the cross, Patterson responded.

Patterson said he and Mohler disagree on the doctrines of election and predestination. Patterson said he finds no biblical basis for Mohler's position. Calvinists, however, strongly affirm the authority of the Bible, and that point of agreement outweighs differences, Patterson said.

"I'd rather have Dr. Mohler hanging around my seminary than someone who had doubts about the Scriptures," he said.

Mohler did not explain how he reconciles his views with the "Baptist Faith and Message," but he offered that the faith statement was "carefully crafted to embrace all that has been said in this room."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

ABP directors OK foundation, proposal for second news bureau

By Bob Allen

DALLAS (ABP) -- Directors of Associated Baptist Press have established a foundation in preparation for a major-gifts campaign scheduled to kick off later this year and endorsed a joint proposal to open the national news service's second regional bureau.

The agency's self-perpetuating board met Sept. 21-23 in a regular semi-annual meeting at the Harvey Hotel near the Dallas-Fort Worth airport, commemorating the news service's founding 10 years earlier.

Editors of Baptist state newspapers gathered in that same hotel in the summer of 1990 in a called session to respond to the imminent firing of two top editors of the Southern Baptist Convention news service, Baptist Press. Afterward, a smaller group met informally to discuss an option of establishing a cooperative of Baptist papers independent from Baptist Press.

Weeks later, the formation of Associated Baptist Press was announced in Nashville, Tenn., minutes after the SBC Executive Committee had voted behind closed doors to fire Baptist Press editors Al Shackelford and Dan Martin, presumably over stories unflattering to SBC leaders.

Today, the Jacksonville, Fla.,-based ABP has seven employees, publishes a magazine, maintains two

Internet Web sites and has emerged as a primary source of Baptist news for state papers and about 85 secular and religious media outlets.

Funding has not kept up with the rapid growth, ABP Executive Editor Greg Warner told directors in a report.

In its first decade, ABP has evolved "from a struggling nonprofit with a budget of under \$100,000 to a struggling nonprofit with a budget just over \$600,000," Warner quipped.

Despite progress during the past 10 years, "there are no laurels to rest on and no guarantee of future success," he said. "The next decade is no more certain than the first and probably less so."

Warner said the agency must in the immediate future "focus on resourcing" through "creative funding partnerships and an entrepreneurial attitude."

In light of rapid changes in Southern Baptist life, coupled with entering what many describe as a post-denominational age, Warner predicted that any agency like ABP would need to "re-evaluate its existence every couple of years and reinvent itself every five."

Warner said ABP's new Washington bureau, Internet presence and FaithWorks, a Christian lifestyle magazine that is now in its third year, each have "opened up new audiences for our product."

"ABP is on more to-do lists than ever before, because of these initiatives," he said.

The "conspicuous short-term reality," however, Warner added, looks something like this:

-- The Washington bureau, while "essential to our task," is not yet fully funded.

-- FaithWorks, while growing, is not yet breaking even.

-- A development office, opened last year, is not yet mature.

"This is no time to signal retreat," Warner said, "but we must move carefully."

Directors adopted a 2001 spending plan of \$775,738, essentially a flat budget.

Directors also asked staff to cut at least \$8,000 from the current budget and pledged to give or raise \$20,000 as a group over and above their regular pledges to head off a shortfall this year.

"We are clearly at a crossroads where we have good things going," said Rebecca Wiggs, chairwoman of ABP's finance committee. "This is not the time for us to start cutting corners and shutting down what we alone are capable of doing."

Directors also approved articles of incorporation for Associated Baptist Press Foundation, Inc., to bolster fund-raising efforts. Warner predicted ABP would emerge from its upcoming major-gifts campaign "as a different organization."

They also approved in principle a joint recommendation with the Baptist General Convention of Texas to open an ABP news bureau located in Dallas. The eventual goal is to have an ABP-staffed and supported news presence in the Southwest. But initially the bureau would rely on staff of the BGCT news office. The proposal includes guidelines delineating between the BGCT's public-relations and ABP's news functions.

ABP directors elected Rebecca Wiggs, an attorney from Jackson, Miss., to chair the board next year. Wiggs, a member of Jackson's Northminster Baptist Church, succeeds Dan Hobbs of Norman, Okla., senior vice chancellor of the Oklahoma State Regents of Higher Education.

They also approved a new board member, Linda Bell of Dallas. She is partner in a family owned insurance business and a member of Ross Avenue Baptist Church, an inner-city mission in Dallas.

She succeeds Jeff Mobley, an attorney from Nashville, Tenn., who declined renomination to the board.

Clinton signs bill protecting churches from zoning laws

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton signed into law Sept. 22 a bill providing houses of worship with greater protection from burdensome zoning restrictions.

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act will also give persons in government-run prisons, hospitals and group homes greater protection for religious exercises that sometimes conflict with broad, generally applicable rules.

The measure, sponsored by Reps. Charles Canady, R-Fla., Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., and Chet Edwards, D-Texas, as well as Senators Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., had broad bipartisan support.

In a White House written statement, Clinton said, "The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act will provide protection for one of our country's greatest liberties -- the exercise of religion -- while carefully preserving the civil rights of all Americans."

Clinton also thanked a broad coalition of religious and civil-rights groups for "the central role they played in crafting this legislation."

"Their work in passing this legislation once again demonstrates that people of all political bents and faiths can work together for a common purpose that benefits all Americans," the president said.

The measure has been a top priority of a coalition of more than 50 religious and civil-liberties groups that first formed to pass the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act. Parts of RFRA failed a constitutional challenge in the Supreme Court in 1997.

Groups from across the political spectrum joined the coalition. It included the conservative Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the liberal American Civil Liberties Union and People For the American Way. Other members included the Christian Legal Society and the National Association of Evangelicals, as well as the National Council of the Churches.

The Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs chaired the religious coalition. Some other groups in the coalition included the American Baptist Churches, American Jewish Congress, American Jewish Committee, Americans United for Separation of Church and State, Family Research Council, Prison Fellowship Ministries and groups representing Muslims, Catholics and a variety of Protestants.

Melissa Rogers, BJC general counsel, released a statement saying the new law "ensures, for example, that a home Bible study or prayer gathering will be treated with at least as much dignity as a Tupperware party or a backyard barbecue."

Rogers, who attended the Oval Office signing, also said the bill would protect people confined to state residential facilities, such as homes for the disabled and correctional facilities, "without compromising security and order in these facilities."

The bill was more narrowly targeted than an earlier bill that left supporters of gay and civil rights fearing it could threaten fair-housing and civil-rights laws.

But conservative religious groups rallied around the measure as a good first step.

Shannon Royce, legislative counsel for the SBC's ERLC, also attended the signing ceremony. "While we're disappointed we were unable to get a more comprehensive law enacted, we're pleased that we can cover 80 percent of the cases by addressing the two major areas covered by this legislation," said Royce in a statement.

The bill would not exempt churches from zoning regulations, but it would require zoning officials to have a compelling reason when they substantially burden religious exercise. It also would require zoning officials to treat religious applicants at least as well as secular ones.

In cases of zoning restrictions and institutions such as prisons, the law will forbid state and local governments from imposing a substantial burden on the exercise of religion unless they can demonstrate that imposition of such a burden is the least restrictive means of furthering a compelling governmental interest.

In a written statement, ACLU officials said, "Claims by disgruntled opponents of the law that it will exempt religious groups from obeying zoning laws are simply untrue." The law "will merely restore basic rights that existed until 1990, when the Supreme Court gutted Americans' right to freely exercise their religion," said Chris Anders of the ACLU.

The new law will likely be challenged in the courts.

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