



Nashville, Tennessee
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Baptist Press**

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October 5, 2000

(00-88)

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**State conventions beginning to deal
with new 'Baptist Faith and Message'**

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The recently revised "Baptist Faith and Message," which one leader pledged would be used as an "instrument of doctrinal accountability" in the Southern Baptist Convention, may also become a litmus test in some Baptist state conventions.

Changes to Southern Baptists' official doctrinal statement have drawn heated debate, most notably in Texas. State convention leaders there are proposing to redefine their funding relationship with the SBC over differences on key theological points.

Other state groups, meanwhile, are embracing the new document.

The million-member Florida Baptist Convention will vote on a bylaw this fall declaring the statement a guide for cooperation. Adherence to the statement would become a qualification for nomination to any convention board or agency and for churches seeking "at-large" membership in the state group. The policy would affect new, but not current, employees of the state convention, according to a report in the Florida Baptist Witness.

"We cannot tell a church what 'Baptist Faith and Message' [version] they are to adopt, but we can say to them that if you're going to participate in the trustee life of the Florida Baptist Convention, it is the framework of the 2000," said John Sullivan, the state convention's executive director.

"Let the record show that the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message' will serve as the theological framework for the ministry of the Florida Baptist Convention," Sullivan continued. "So if there's any question in anyone's mind further about that, I hope this puts that to bed."

Arkansas Baptists are also scheduled to vote on a constitutional amendment updating a reference declaring the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" as the convention's doctrinal guideline to specify adherence to the 2000 revision.

The proposal adds a new phrase to the article affirming the autonomy of the local church and the priesthood of the believer. According to a report in the Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine, that language was included to guard against the document being used as a creed.

"There were a couple of areas in the new 'Baptist Faith and Message' that several of our committee members had concerns about," said Samuel Roberts, chairman of the committee proposing the change. "Some felt that in a couple of places one interpretation of Scripture was being included as the only interpretation of Scripture. When anyone claims one interpretation is the only interpretation of Scripture, we have some problems."

Roberts, pastor of First Baptist Church in Walnut Ridge, Ark., said most committee members felt the recommendation would be a way to defuse a potentially volatile issue.

Georgia Baptists will consider a resolution previously adopted by a key committee expressing "official approval and appreciation of" the 2000 revision, according to the Christian Index newspaper.

In an effort to pre-empt any potential effort to make the "Baptist Faith and Message" a litmus test for employees in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, however, a state board re-affirmed its current hiring practice. Rather than asking applicants to sign a doctrinal statement, they are asked in an interview to give a general statement of their faith and are required to belong to a cooperating church.

Since its adoption last June, the faith statement has become the latest dividing line between moderates and conservatives in the nation's largest Protestant denomination.

Moderates have objected particularly to the removal of phrases describing the Bible as "the record of" God's revelation and Jesus Christ as the criterion by which the Bible should be interpreted.

Conservatives counter that those and other phrases in the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" allowed liberal and neo-orthodox professors to infiltrate SBC seminaries in the 1960s and 1970s, prompting the "conservative resurgence" of the last two decades.

Since the SBC adopted the changes, several trustee boards at SBC entities have voted to endorse the updated version of the statement.

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-- By ABP staff

North Carolina Baptists to consider redefining university relationship

CARAWAY, N.C. (ABP) -- The Baptist State Convention of North Carolina would define a "historical" relationship with Wake Forest University instead of the "fraternal" bond it now shares, under a current proposal.

At odds with the university at Winston-Salem over recent decisions to sell beer and wine on campus and to permit a church meeting in the campus chapel to bless a same-sex union, North Carolina Baptists voted last fall to terminate the fraternal relationship with the university.

In response, North Carolina Baptists' General Board approved constitutional changes Sept. 26-27 referencing Wake Forest, which since 1986 has elected its own trustees, as a "historical educational institution."

The action also excludes the university from a state council on Christian higher education but leaves intact scholarships for Baptist students amounting to \$28,000.

The proposal generated considerable discussion. Some speakers called for eliminating any reference at all to the university in convention documents and ceasing the scholarships. Others, however, said history cannot be rewritten and that past contributions of the school, founded by the state convention in 1834, and its alumni should not be ignored.

The motion passed with three dissenting votes, and now goes to the state convention for final consideration.

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-- Adapted from a Biblical Recorder story written by Tony Cartledge.

U.S. poverty rate hits 20-year low

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Low-income Americans may finally be feeling some benefit from the booming economy, according to U.S. Census Bureau reports showing the poverty rate dropping to its lowest level since 1979.

The percentage of Americans living on income below the poverty line dropped from 12.7 percent in 1998 to 11.8 percent in 1999, according to new statistics. And median household income reached \$40,816 -- the highest level ever recorded.

But a social activist interviewed by Associated Baptist Press said that is not nearly enough progress.

"Is poverty over?" asked Jim Wallis, convener of Call to Renewal, a national movement to overcome poverty. "I'd say not."

But Wallis, who also is editor of Sojourners magazine, called it "certainly good news that we're beginning to see some improvement in poverty statistics in this time of unprecedented prosperity of the richest nation in the world."

The Census Bureau reports used \$17,029 in annual income as the average poverty threshold for a family of four. For a family of three, the poverty line was \$13,290.

"Every racial and ethnic group experienced a drop in both the number of poor and the percent in poverty, as did children, the elderly and people ages 25 to 44," said Daniel Weinberg, chief of the Census Bureau's Housing and Household Economic Statistics Division.

According to the report, 2.2 million fewer people were poor in 1999 than in 1998 -- 32.3 million versus 34.5 million.

The 1999 poverty rates for non-whites set or equaled historic lows, the report showed. The rate for African Americans, 23.6 percent, was the lowest ever recorded by the bureau.

The percentage and number of poor declined in the Northwest and West but remained unchanged in the South and Midwest.

Wallis said the reports still show that 32 million Americans are poor, which means one in six children are in poverty instead of one in five. Wallis said in Sweden, that number is one in 50 children, in Germany it is one in 20 and in Britain it is one in 12. "No other country in the world has anything approaching our child-poverty rates except the poorest countries of the world," he said.

And Wallis noted that the gap between rich and poor is still growing in America, where CEOs have seen a 540 percent increase in their salaries in the same amount of time the average worker's wages have grown 32 percent. If workers' wages had grown as fast as those of top executives, the minimum wage would by now be \$27 an hour, he said.

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Supreme Court sets aside ruling on graduation prayers

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has thrown out an appeals-court decision allowing student-led prayers at high-school graduations, citing a high court ruling barring such prayers at football games.

The Oct. 2 order vacates an earlier 10-2 ruling by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals that a Jacksonville, Fla., school-board policy allowing an elected student to lead a graduation "message," which may or may not include a prayer, does not violate the First Amendment.

The Supreme Court ordered the appellate court to re-evaluate the case in light of its own ruling in June that a Sante Fe, Texas, policy of opening home football games with prayer is unconstitutional.

The Supreme Court has previously allowed student-led, student-initiated prayers at graduation ceremonies, as long as they are non-sectarian and non-proselytizing. The ruling on the Texas case did not address graduation prayers but questioned the practice of sponsoring an election.

Writing the majority decision in June, 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," which is protected by the Constitution.

The Florida policy was instituted after the school district's long tradition of graduation prayers was declared unconstitutional in 1992. The policy allows each senior class to decide whether or not to include a two-minute opening or closing statement and elect the student to give it. School officials may not regulate the content of student messages, which can be on any topic.

Families challenging the policy in a lawsuit, however, called it a sham effort to circumvent Supreme Court rulings against school-sponsored prayer that violates the First Amendment ban on establishment of religion.

According to the Florida Times-Union, members of the school board said they would wait and see if the appeals court upholds the prayer policy. If it doesn't, they said the board would have to decide whether to continue to use taxpayer money to further defend the policy.

In another court case with possible church-state ramifications, a state appeals court said a circuit judge erred in March when he said Florida's school-voucher violates the state's Constitution.

A three-judge panel of the 1st District Court of Appeals ruled unanimously that nothing in Florida's Constitution forbids the use of public funds for private education. The ruling does not consider, however, the question of whether allowing vouchers to be used at religious schools violates the separation of church and state.

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-- By ABP staff

Church accounts may be audited, say charitable choice backers

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Being allowed to contract with the government to provide social services like drug rehabilitation might seem like a windfall to churches and other religious organizations already performing those ministries, but it could open them to greater government scrutiny and regulation.

That's the opinion not only of opponents of so-called "charitable choice" measures now before Congress, but, ironically, of some supporters as well.

Lawmakers at a Sept. 28 press conference promoting charitable choice acknowledged that houses of worship that accept taxpayer funds could be subject to audit by the government.

"Any government funds have the potential of an audit." Rep. Mark Souder, R-Ind., said in an interview following the press conference. "If you want government money, there is going to be red tape."

Among criticism leveled against allowing tax dollars to flow into church coffers is that accompanying regulations could infringe on the free exercise of religion.

Souder said the government should audit only special accounts set up by houses of worship to administer charitable-choice funds and not other church accounts.

But only one of the several spending measures now before Congress that include charitable choice requires that a church set up a separate account for public funds.

The American Jewish Congress in Texas has sued a Christian organization that it alleges used charitable-choice funds to proselytize. Souder said he was unaware of the case but added that churches ought to know that "if they get sloppy they are going to get sued."

Another key supporter of charitable choice, Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., said, government auditing of taxpayer funds that go to a church a matter of "accountability."

Santorum said faith could be an integral part of tax-funded programs, but public funds should not be used for evangelism. Teaching people in a program about the sayings of Jesus is not proselytizing, he said, but "asking them to convert" is.

Stanley Carlson-Thies, director of social-policy studies at the Center for Public Justice, a Christian study center that sponsored the press conference, also spoke. He advised that any group accepting tax money should set up a separate account and be aware that "government has the ability to audit that account."

"When public funds are spent," he said, "there are certain rules to be followed."

The focus of the press conference was the release of a report card on state-by-state implementation of charitable-choice legislation already on the books.

The study gave 40 states failing grades for refusing to "become more flexible in how they work with faith-based groups to provide welfare services for the poor."

"A few states are seizing the opportunities provided by charitable choice to build new relationships with effective faith-based groups," Carlson-Thies said. "The scandal is that more than four years after Congress first adopted charitable choice, most states have not fully removed the barriers as the law requires."

Twelve states received passing grades from the Center for Public Justice for allowing religious groups to compete for tax funds to provide social services. Texas received the highest grade.

'Church hopping' trend becoming more common

By Amanda Phifer

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- If "bloom where you are planted" epitomized church life in the 1970s, today's slogan is "you better shop around."

Each year one out of every seven adults changes churches, according to the Barna Research Group. And one of six attends two or more churches on a rotating basis.

Americans are a religious people, and church remains an important aspect of life for tens of millions of Americans. However, there is less concern about "brand loyalty" to churches than there used to be, says Barna. "Although Americans do not change churches as regularly as they change the brand of gasoline they use, church loyalty is a modern casualty," says the research company based in Oxnard, Calif.

Though pervasive, "church hopping" is a trend that in some ways defies explanation. Few churches and denominations keep track of how long members stay or why they leave. Little research has been done into what motivates church loyalty.

One common explanation is consumer mentality. If one church lacks a desirable trait or service, today's churchgoer will look elsewhere.

"Religion and spirituality have become just another product in the broader marketplace of goods and services," American Demographics magazine observed in April 1999.

Adults will flit from one church to another the way they hunt for Christmas bargains: Which church has the best childcare? Which church has my favorite style of music? Which church has the strongest recreation program? Which church is the friendliest?

In a society where there is always another option, even religion is for sale.

Perhaps that explains the "Church Shopping Guide" offered online by Atonement Evangelical Lutheran Church in Wisconsin. The "guide" suggests a series of questions the church shopper should ask: Is this church a theater or a temple? A gymnasium or a hospital?

Translation: Want a church where worship is about God and not entertainment? Where wounded people come for healing or the healthy come for exercise?

Also out there on the vast Web is Nicole. Unhappy in her Catholic parish, she went to an Internet chat room for church-shopping advice. Todd advised her to explore some other parishes. Malcolm joined the e-mail discussion: "It is all too easy to flit from parish to parish seeking some particular atmosphere, way of doing things, etc. The Mass then gets treated more as entertainment than something in which we participate."

It's not always a search for the best show, though.

"Sometimes people are just looking for a good fit, and they can't find it," San Francisco-area resident Brad Sargent told the Christian lifestyle magazine FaithWorks. "You find that this church helps you grow spiritually but doesn't have an outlet for you to serve in. So you keep looking."

Sargent describes himself as "bi-churchal."

"I go to one church where I can grow spiritually, participate in a Gen-Xer worship service, and serve to make a global impact. I go to another, new church on Sunday evening to contribute to my local community through service there. Why should my attendance be an either/or? Why can't it be both/and? This fulfills me. I don't think church hopping has to be a negative."

The choice of a church used to be a simpler matter. Most people stuck to one denomination, often predetermined by family background, ethnicity or geography. Now blurred doctrinal lines and an option-driven consumer culture have changed the equation. Hopping churches has become a way of life for many.

Most churches are unprepared for the new ground rules. They watch in bewilderment as their membership rolls turn over or even decline.

Co-pastor Grant Teagarden and the other folks just starting Living Hope Church in Santa Clara, Calif., hope they have the solution -- a little something for everyone.

"For those from a liturgical background, we'd like to set up a room where you can come before the service and have communion and liturgy. For those who just need quiet and prayer, we'd have a room where the prayer team can pray for you and you can meditate. We'd like to have a service where all the members of the family can worship together, without having to be separated."

Lifestyle changes also complicate the picture. The average working couple logs 717 more office hours a year than they did in 1969.

James Atherton, pastor of the seeker-oriented church The Bridge, in downtown San Francisco, deals with the expanding influence of work with Silicon Valley's "dot-com" entrepreneurs.

"Their take is, 'I'm going to work 24/7 for the next 10 years, totally give up my life, and retire a millionaire at 35 or 40,'" says Atherton. "And they take a mattress to the office. It leaves little time to attend a church, much less stick with one."

Adds Tiffaney Threatt, a member of Kathwood Baptist Church in Columbia, S.C., in a tired voice: "You work 48 hours in a week -- and you worked 12 of those Saturday -- and you just want a day off."

For a person who hasn't settled into one church, it's easier to take that day off without feeling guilty. Likewise, attending church sporadically keeps many people from getting deeply involved anywhere.

Other church hoppers say their membership shifts with their spiritual development.

"Your needs change," says Reggie McNeal, a leadership-development specialist from South Carolina. "You attend this church partly because the children's ministry is very good. But children grow up into teenagers, and maybe this church doesn't have a strong youth ministry, and so you look for a church that does."

It happened to Jo from Columbia, S.C. After several years at a downtown Presbyterian church with a "warm and wonderful pastor" and a "fantastic children's ministry," she took her two children across town to a different Presbyterian church. They were teenagers now, and there was little for them at the downtown church.

About four years later they transferred again, this time to the Baptist church across the street from the Presbyterian one. Her children had graduated high school and there was a new pastor at the Baptist church. Her needs had changed.

So who exactly is church hopping? Is it just the Gen-Xers who flit from church to church? Is it just the market-shaping Boomers?

Lyle Schaller writes about those generational differences: "The loyal member born before 1940 is upset and baffled when a longtime member becomes dissatisfied and quietly departs to worship with a different congregation in that same community. The younger member, who was reared in a culture overflowing with choices, shrugs off that departure as normal and completely acceptable."

While each generation has a different take on loyalty, church hopping is about more than generational differences.

"It's a values issue more than a generational one," says Brad Sargent, who studies and teaches on ministry in the postmodern era. While some church hopping is a result of consumerism, particularly among Boomers, Sargent says, "Postmoderns, whatever their age, do it more for spiritual reasons."

Futurist Cassidy Dale agrees. "I think often when people church hop, they're looking for spiritual hooks. They want to be drawn in deeper. They're looking for spiritual depth."

"The postmodern church-hopper is looking for spiritual meat," explains Dale, a research consultant in Washington, D.C. "They want a church with a unique calling and identity, one that will go with them on an adventurous spiritual journey."

He pauses, then drops the bomb. "Many churches don't offer this."

While many church leaders lament the cultural changes that have made us a nation of church hoppers, others are more accepting.

"I cannot in good faith judge the church hopper," admits consultant Jim Simpson of Columbia, S.C. "God may be working in their lives. He may be using their church hopping. If they're honestly looking for the beef, why berate them? I wish we had enough substance that we were worthy of being hopped to!"

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- Amanda Phifer is a seminary student and free-lance writer in Mill Valley, Calif.

Most churches do nothing about church-hopping trend, experts say

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Here's how churches respond to hopping, according to congregational leaders and consultants polled by FaithWorks magazine:

-- Deny it. "Churches for the most part are in denial that people church hop, especially if they can't tell by looking at the numbers," says Jim Simpson, discipleship director at the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

In fact, experts say, few churches and denominations keep track of how long members stay or why they leave.

-- Do nothing. "The majority of churches respond with hand-wringing and think it must be the preacher's fault," says Roy Oswald, senior consultant with the Alban Institute research organization. "[They] know they need to do something different, but don't know what. And so [they] don't do anything."

-- Don't worry about it. "Most of the thriving churches I know focus on empowering those who find what they need at their church," says author and consultant Bill Easum. "They don't feel it makes much difference what church people go to as long as they are growing in Christ."

Adds Easum's colleague Tom Bandy, "Most thriving churches recognize that church hopping is just part of the reality of the pre-Christian world."

-- Hook the committed ones. Some churches are bucking the church-hopping trend by requiring members to sign covenants or agreements that detail the conditions of membership. "Membership here means 'I'm joining this family and committing myself in the responsibilities of this church,'" says James Atherton, pastor of The Bridge church in San Francisco.

Books like High Expectation Churches by academician Thom Rainer and Building High Commitment in a Low Commitment World by discipleship guru Bill Hull have met with raving success by church leaders looking for ways to close the back door.

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-- By Amanda Phifer

Confessions of a church hopper

By Matthew Lester

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- My Sunday mornings have become a spiritual buffet. I begin with breakfast at a small Mennonite house church, followed by worship and sharing time. I skip out halfway through the service to fill a different craving at a buildingless church located under an interstate highway overpass.

I'm not proud of the fact that I'm a church hopper. I'm a devout drifter committed to nothing.

Why do I church hop? A hunger for something deeper than filling a pew -- I want to be filled. I struggle to get my needs met at one service and one church. I'm a product of a generation that has been told they can have it their way and accursed with short attention spans. Church should cater to me. I'll fill my plate where my craving of the moment is satisfied.

I attempt to fill my hunger for intimacy at Hope Fellowship, a Mennonite congregation with less than 20 members. The church is a tight-knit group of families drawn together to create a community through belief. I enjoy observing the family interactions and relationships created through sharing God.

I'm uncommitted to the church because I'm different. I'm at a weird in-between stage -- not one of the kids but not married with kids. I'm misunderstood; my desire is to build a career, not a family at this point. I came here as a Sunday morning refugee from a street church, from a non-traditional church seeking what I needed and could not find.

Church Under the Bridge is a form of religious chaos for a chaotic mind and spirit. Traffic roars overhead at 70 mph. There are foreign smells and nobody wears "church clothes." The 200 people in attendance, many of them poor, sit on folding chairs. It seems that about half of them are constantly moving. But when you shut out the distractions, God is present.

The church's lack of homogeneity drew me in. In my eyes, it resembled the kingdom of God. People of every color, income and education are brought together. It was the place where I became a Christian. It seemed real, a place where the gospel was lived out. My church hopping began here. Slowly I became desensitized to the poverty and then overwhelmed when I was not sure how to approach it. It all became a novelty to me, a place where I could stand at a distance.

Church hopping has consequences. It has isolated me and given me guilt from lack of commitment to any single body. Maybe my neurotic mind thinks about it all too much. I've created an analytical detachment, a certain critical view of church that has made me judgmental -- I like this, I don't like that. I've become a Sunday-morning anthropologist, seeking to watch something different when it all begins to look familiar.

Hopefully, I'll settle down some day.

By the way, does anybody know of a Gen-X contemporary worship around here?

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-- Matthew Lester is a photographer in Waco, Texas.

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