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IN THIS ISSUE:

- Jubilee 2000 movement wins full debt-relief package**
- Bread for the World churches recommit to ending hunger**
- Interfaith Alliance asks Bush, Gore to denounce 'partisan' voter guides**
- Falwell issues letter defending Christian Coalition voter guides**
- Pro-choice religious coalition launches abortion ads**
- Commission asks Clinton to discuss religious liberty with Russian president**

**Jubilee 2000 movement
wins full debt-relief package**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- People in the pews can make a difference, say supporters of an international religious movement for debt relief that won a major victory in Congress Oct. 25.

Most people doubt that letters, phone calls and visits from a handful of constituents can tip the scales in a bid to get congressional support for legislation. But that is just what happened, observers say, when Congress passed a foreign-operations spending bill that includes \$435 million toward debt relief for the world's poorest nations.

The win surprised even supporters of the bill, who were convinced that lawmakers would approve only a portion of their request. Congress, however, provided all the funds necessary this year to fund the United States' share of an agreement among the leading industrialized nations to forgive debts facing poor countries.

The spending bill cleared the House on a 307-101 vote. The Senate followed with a 65-27 vote. The bill now heads to President Clinton, who is expected to sign it into law.

"We are heartened by the show of bipartisan support in the Congress," said Dan Driscoll-Shaw, national coordinator for Jubilee 2000/USA. "Now that Congress has acted, it is up to the countries to make sure that the money freed as a result of debt cancellation is spent in a transparent way for the betterment of people."

The Jubilee 2000 campaign is religiously based and inspired by the Old Testament concept of "jubilee," the idea that every 50 years debts should be forgiven and slaves set free.

Two years ago, members of Congress barely knew about the movement. Prompted by reports of children in poor countries dying because their governments were spending more in interest payments than on health and education, an international religious and human-rights movement mobilized.

Bread For the World, one of dozens of supporting organizations, said the real story behind the movement's success "is the important role churches and individuals have played in bringing the debt-relief issue into the national arena.

"Not since Dr. Martin Luther King and the civil-rights movement has the grassroots action of churches and people of goodwill so influenced our nation's leaders."

The measure passed with broad bipartisan support. And that bipartisanship stemmed from the broad group of religious figures backing the initiative, including Pat Robertson, Billy Graham, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Jesse Jackson, Tony Campolo and others.

When the movement started, supporters had only one Democrat on board as a sponsor -- Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass. But momentum gained as people of faith across the country became active.

An early victory for the movement came when a conservative Republican came on board and became a passionate advocate for debt relief.

Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala., a Southern Baptist, was approached by a group of Presbyterians in his district.

Bachus was approached by Pat Pelham, a BFW member from Independent Presbyterian Church in Birmingham. Pelham and friends visited Bachus and told him that 30,000 children die every day from hunger and other preventable causes.

According to a column in Sojourners magazine written by Bread for the World's David Beckmann, one member of Pelham' group told Bachus, "If I had to choose between paying debt that I had inherited from my parents and buying food for my children, the choice would be clear."

Against the recommendation of his staff, the meeting led Bachus to become an original sponsor of the measure and it's most passionate congressional advocate.

When the House Banking Committee met to discuss the measure, Bachus said: "If we don't write off some of this debt, poor people in these countries will be suffering for the rest of their lives. And we'll be suffering a lot longer than that."

Bachus' comments led Treasury Secretary Lawrence Summers to push for the initiative within the administration, and Clinton offered the proposal to leaders from the top industrialized nations of the world.

Bachus has "come to see the world differently because of the church people back home who had approached him about Jubilee," Beckmann wrote. Bachus now says he had not thought about places like Africa before, but "now, when Congress debates whether U.S. health care is too expensive at \$2,200 per capita per year, I'm struck that a country like Ethiopia spends \$10 on health care per capita per year."

Bachus is just one in a long list of lawmakers who signed on to the measure after people of faith from their district pressed them on the issue.

The Southern Baptist Convention is one of the few national religious denominations that had little or no involvement in the debt-relief effort. The president of Nigeria, a Baptist, sent a letter to SBC officials requesting their support but at the time of this article had not received a response.

Other Baptist individuals and groups, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A and the Baptist General Convention of Texas, however, actively touted the measure.

The White House recently called a bipartisan meeting to work on an agreement attended by Pat Robertson and other supporters. But standing in the way of the debt-relief package until recently was Sen. Phil Gramm, R-Texas.

Observers say Texas constituents got Gramm to support the initiative after Pat Robertson told "700 Club" viewers to call Gramm and Marv Knox, editor of the Texas Baptist Standard, wrote an editorial asking Texas Baptists to do the same.

"The fate of many of the world's poorest people awaits the action of two Texans," Knox wrote, pointing to Gramm and Rep. Dick Armey, R-Texas. Knox pointed out that under the debt-relief package "the

poor countries must develop poverty-reduction strategies, economic reforms and procedures to ensure that the funds saved by this debt reduction will be channeled directly to reducing poverty."

Another unlikely story told by Jubilee 2000 supporters is how rock singer Bono of U2 prompted the support of the conservative Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C.

Helms told The Hill newspaper that he was deeply impressed by his meeting with Bono on the issue. Helms told the Irish rock star: "If I can find some way that the Lord would show me how to really help these people, I'd quit the Senate and try to do it. I told Bono that. He is working hard and I'm going to try to help him the best I can."

Helms added that Bono -- a longtime advocate of debt relief -- "is a deeply religious man. ... He is here to sincerely get something going to feed the starving children in Africa."

The U.S. commitment on debt relief will again be tested next year as the G-8 agreement calls on another few hundred million from the United States. But this year's \$435 million was the largest installment in the three-year package.

Bread for the World's Beckmann said the debt-relief measure "is a great victory for hungry people in the poorest countries around the world and is a direct result of the concerned citizens in this country who raised voices on their behalf."

-30-

Bread for the World churches recommit to ending hunger

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Christian anti-hunger organization is predicting 500,000 people in pews across the country will rededicate their efforts Oct. 29 to end hunger by calling on elected officials.

Bread For the World is asking for the rededication on the heels of some major legislative victories, including passage of debt relief for impoverished countries and portions of the Hunger Relief Act.

Grassroots interest in poverty issues, including hunger, is on the rise, officials of the organization said in a press briefing Oct. 25. Last year, about 300 churches asked for roughly 85,000 bulletin inserts on the issue. But this year, more than 1,800 churches have requested all of the 500,000 inserts Bread For the World has printed.

BFW President David Beckmann attributes the increased interest to direct mail and other organized communication efforts by the group as well as a prosperous economy where some people are realizing those left behind.

"Despite persistent hunger in the United States and around the world, hunger has not been an election issue," said Beckmann. "But hunger is one problem we could actually solve. We must get out government to do its part."

A press release said that nearly 800 million people worldwide still go to bed hungry. In the United States, 31 million people, including 12 million children, "live in households that still struggle to get the food they need."

Beckmann told reporters it is "horrible" that America is enjoying such economic prosperity yet still posting such high numbers on poverty and hunger. "We don't have to wait for Jesus to come to end widespread hunger among our children," Beckmann said.

Many of the churches that participate in Bread For the World activities regularly write letters to members of Congress in support of anti-hunger legislation. And with passage of the debt-relief package, an increase in aid to Africa and an increase in some U.S. food-aid programs, Beckmann said, "We're on a roll."

-30-

Interfaith Alliance asks Bush, Gore to denounce 'partisan' voter guides

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Leaders of the Interfaith Alliance are asking presidential candidates George W. Bush and Al Gore to ask houses of worship to denounce the distribution of what they call partisan voter guides, such as those produced by the Christian Coalition.

"Our spiritual homes and nation's religious leaders should not be treated as pawns or political bosses in a partisan battle for elected office," said Welton Gaddy, a Baptist minister and executive director of the Interfaith Alliance.

The alliance has set the weekend of Oct. 27-29 as "Call to a Faithful Decision Weekend," urging religious leaders to send the message from the pulpit that "voting is a civic duty and moral obligation." The alliance has made an interfaith worship guide available online.

Speaking at a press conference, Knighton Stanley, senior minister of Peoples Congregational United Church of Christ, said the "integrity of our houses of worship should not be put at risk by distributing partisan voter guides offered by the Christian Coalition."

Associated Baptist Press called the Christian Coalition for a response but calls were not returned as of filing of this story. The group has claimed in the past, however, that its guides are non-partisan. The coalition typically distributed the guides in churches the Sunday prior to the Tuesday national elections.

"Waiting until the Sunday before the election to distribute the guides leaves candidates with only two days to respond before voters head to the polls," Stanley said. "This is not by accident." He described the guides as "voter indoctrination tools."

Neither the Bush nor the Gore campaigns returned ABP's calls for comment.

-30-

Falwell issues letter defending Christian Coalition voter guides

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Trying to minimize fears churches have that distributing the controversial Christian Coalition voter guides might violate tax laws, prominent Southern Baptist pastor Jerry Falwell has issued a letter defending the guides.

In an Oct. 26 letter to pastors, Falwell said the voter guides encourage "people to take into consideration the views of Al Gore and George W. Bush on education, abortion, school vouchers and other issues, prior to voting in November."

"The voter guides present the voting records of candidates and incumbents across the nation so that voters can be informed on the key issues when they go to the polls," said Falwell, pastor of Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., and founder of the Moral Majority.

Falwell said groups like Americans United for the Separation of Church and State and the Interfaith Alliance have condemned the voter guides, saying their distribution in churches violates "the so-called separation of church and state."

Falwell charged those organizations do not have trouble, however, "with Democrats getting cozy with liberal pastors." He pointed to news reports that Vice President Al Gore recently urged black pastors to advise their members to vote in November.

"In no way do the [Christian Coalition] voter guides urge people to vote in a particular way," Falwell said. He added that Mathew Staver, founder and co-counsel of the Orlando-based Liberty Counsel, said churches "may indeed distribute non-partisan voter guides."

But Americans United says the Christian Coalition's guides are partisan and thus jeopardize a church's tax-exempt status if the church distributes them.

In fact, while the Christian Coalition steered clear of many violations of election laws in a recent lawsuit from the Federal Election Commission, the judge noted the partisan nature of the guides.

U.S. District Judge Joyce Hens Green said in all but two instances the Christian Coalition only narrowly avoided a coordination of its voter guides and get-out-the-vote expenditures that would have violated federal election laws and "not for a lack of trying."

Green spoke only to federal election laws and not tax issues.

At the time of the decision, however, Marcus Owens, director of the Internal Revenue Service's Exempt Organizations Division, said churches should not look to rulings on federal election laws for guidance on compliance with federal tax laws. "Election laws and tax laws are different sets of rules," he said.

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Pro-choice religious coalition launches abortion ads

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Religious Coalition for Reproductive Choice has launched an advertising campaign on the eve of the national elections arguing that "abortion is a personal decision best left in the hands of a woman and her God."

The ads depict a clergyman and clergywoman -- representing clergy of many faiths -- who believe abortion "can be a responsible decision of conscience and faith," according to an Oct. 24 press release from the group.

"The purpose of our ads is to get the message out that voters think abortion is personal, not political," said Carlton Veazey, a minister and president of the religious coalition.

"More than three-quarters -- including conservative Christians -- want the government out of the business of deciding who can have an abortion, when, how and why," said Veazey, pastor of Fellowship Baptist Church in Washington. "They trust women to decide, according to their personal beliefs and circumstances."

The ads have been placed on billboards in Minneapolis-St. Paul; Columbus, Ohio and Flint, Mich. They have also been placed on bus transit cards in Denver, Boston and St. Louis.

The coalition was founded in 1973. It is comprised of 40 national organizations from 16 denominations and faith traditions.

-30-

Commission asks Clinton to discuss religious liberty with Russian president

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to President Clinton Oct. 26 urging that he raise religious-freedom issues with Russia's President Vladimir Putin at their upcoming meeting.

Clinton is scheduled to meet with Putin in mid-November at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Brunei. The commission, which formed last year under a new U.S. law, is concerned about a Dec. 31 deadline for religious groups in Russia to register or be "liquidated."

To date nearly half the groups have been unable to register. The commission's letter, written by chairman Elliott Abrams, asks Clinton to urge Putin to intervene to speed up the registration process and postpone the deadline.

"Given the progress made in the last eight years in many aspects of U.S.-Russian relations, it would be deeply unfortunate if January brought news of a systematic deterioration in religious freedom in Russia," the letter says.

Abrams said the 1997 Russian law "restricts the rights, powers, and privileges of smaller, or newer, or foreign religious communities, while giving special status to Russia's 'traditional' religions, including Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism."

He said the law also "creates an onerous and intrusive registration process and other instruments the federal or local officials can use to interfere with religious organizations' activities."

Abrams specifically asked Clinton to use the upcoming meeting "to stress to Putin how seriously the U.S. takes the issue of religious freedom and how important it is, both for Russia's future and for U.S.-Russian relations, that he postpone the Dec. 31 deadline."

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