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## **Religious leaders split on Ashcroft nomination**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- While the Southern Baptists' Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission urged support for John Ashcroft as the next U.S. attorney general, other religious leaders questioned the former senator's commitment to the separation of church and state.

Responding to criticism by liberal interest groups including People For the American Way and the National Organization of Women, ERLC President Richard Land wrote senators urging confirmation of the nomination by President-elect George W. Bush.

"On behalf of the vast majority of over 16 million Southern Baptists nationwide, I urge you to support the confirmation of Sen. John Ashcroft," Land urged lawmakers.

In a press statement, Land asked Senate Judiciary Committee members to "reject the religious test promoted by some radical voices who would disqualify Mr. Ashcroft from this office because he is willing to apply his Christianity to his public life."

Land said that Ashcroft's "faith will make him a better attorney general, not a worse one."

Meanwhile, religious leaders from a variety of faith groups said in a press conference that senators should question Ashcroft about his commitment to upholding the separation of church and state.

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, called Ashcroft -- a devout Pentecostal Christian -- "a man of deep and abiding faith," and said he respected Ashcroft's faith commitment. Gaddy said he had "grave concern," however, about Ashcroft's ability as attorney general to uphold and fully enforce the constitutional rights of "faith groups that he clearly judges to be wrong and in need of correction."

Gaddy said the Interfaith Alliance is taking no stand on the nomination for now but might oppose Ashcroft depending on how he answers questions regarding religious liberty.

In a Jan. 11 letter to Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, the Interfaith Alliance cited "profound concerns" about Ashcroft's stands on school-sponsored prayer, the posting of religious documents in public places and government-funded proselytization.

"Some supporters of Sen. Ashcroft are suggesting that questioning his nomination stems from hostility toward religion in American civic life," Gaddy said. "Let me say unequivocally, we affirm his right as a person of faith to express that faith. However, we believe strongly that religion in the public square must respect the rights of others to practice faith without imposing one ideology or belief."

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, also spoke at the press conference. The BJC is a 65-year-old religious liberty agency that supports church-state separation. The BJC does not support or oppose candidates for office -- elected or appointed -- Walker said. But Walker questioned whether Ashcroft "is up to the job."

"It's important that the attorney general of the United States be committed without apology and without reservation to the separation of church and state," Walker said. "Sen. Ashcroft's record reveals a hostility to and a lack of understanding of that cherished principle."

"If he fails to protect the religious liberty of any American," Walker added, "the religious liberty of every American will be threatened."

Ashcroft defended his record on civil rights, voting rights and his own opposition to some Clinton nominees at a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing Jan. 16.

He vowed that if he is confirmed "injustice against individuals will not stand." Ashcroft also said that although he is opposed to abortion under any circumstance he would enforce the law of the land as stated in *Roe v. Wade*. "No woman should fear being threatened or coerced in seeking constitutionally protected health services," he said in the hearing.

James Dunn, visiting professor of Christianity and Public Policy at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., was scheduled to testify against the Ashcroft nomination in the Senate Judiciary Committee. Dunn -- former BJC executive director -- said he is not speaking for the BJC but will oppose Ashcroft.

Another Baptist weighing in on the nomination is Robert Parham, executive director for the Baptist Center for Ethics based in Nashville, Tenn. In letters to national newspapers, Parham said: "Religious conservatives are right when they say personal integrity matters for political leaders. ... But they are wrong to hide faulty positions behind the mask of personal integrity. And Ashcroft's positions on the separation of church and state are most troubling."

Parham said Ashcroft supports official prayer in public schools and religious school vouchers. "He thinks the Supreme Court has erected 'a wall of religious oppression,'" Parham said.

According to Baptist Press, the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has never before endorsed a cabinet nominee before the Senate, but it did oppose two Bill Clinton nominees in the past. Land said the agency does not endorse candidates for elected office because individual Southern Baptists have the right to express themselves through the voting booth. In a process like a Senate confirmation, however, that opportunity does not exist.

"So when there are issues of vital concern to Southern Baptists at stake and where Southern Baptists have made those concerns abundantly clear, either in their confessional statement or convention resolutions, we feel it is incumbent upon us to make certain that the people's elected representatives are aware of those convictions and values," Land explained.

"The vast majority of Southern Baptists would be upset with the ERLC if we were not expressing support for this man of sterling integrity and bedrock Christian faith," Land said.

## **James Dunn set to testify in Ashcroft nomination hearing**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- James Dunn, visiting professor of Christianity and Public Policy at Wake Forest Divinity School and former Baptist Joint Committee head, will oppose George W. Bush's nomination to head the Department of Justice, former Sen. John Ashcroft.

In prepared testimony obtained by Associated Baptist Press from the Senate Judiciary Committee, Dunn addresses concerns about church-state views held by Ashcroft, a former senator and governor from Missouri. Dunn was scheduled to testify on the last of four panels, on either Jan. 18 or Jan. 19.

Dunn told ABP his actual verbal statement to senators might differ at points from his written testimony.

But in the document, Dunn says that Ashcroft's "identification with and approval of the political agenda of religious, right-wing extremism in this country convinces me that he is utterly unqualified and must be assumed to be unreliable for such a serious trust."

Dunn also criticizes Ashcroft's "most notable" initiative -- known as "charitable choice" -- whereby government funds the religious social service ministries of houses of worship.

"One cannot assume that taking tax dollars will not change the nature, even the freedom and effectiveness, of faith-based programs," he argues.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

## **Most or all Southwestern profs have signed new faith statement**

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- "Almost all" the faculty members at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, have signed the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message," according to Scotty Gray, vice president for academic administration.

"I think they are probably all signed, but I don't know that they're all signed," Gray said Jan. 9. He cannot say for sure, he said, because each school's dean is responsible for obtaining the signatures of their own faculty members. Also, some faculty members are on sabbatical and may not have been reached.

"There may be some sabbatic people and one or two others" who haven't yet signed, Gray said, but "almost all" have signed the revised faith statement.

The signatures of all faculty members should be collected by March, President Ken Hemphill said. Hemphill also said he doesn't know the exact status of the process at this point because he has not been briefed by the other deans since the Christmas break.

All full-time and adjunct faculty -- including those at Southwestern's off-campus centers in Houston, Lubbock, San Antonio and Shawnee, Okla. -- are required to sign the new "Baptist Faith and Message" in order to teach, Gray said.

While Gray could not name any full-time faculty members who have refused to sign the statement, he acknowledged some adjunct faculty have refused. He could not give an exact number of those refusing to sign but said he believes it is small.

"What is being signed by the faculty members is that a person will affirm this, abide by it, teach by it and not teach contrary to it," Gray said.

The revision of the "Baptist Faith and Message" and the subsequent requirement that all faculty at the six Southern Baptist Convention seminaries sign it has been a major point of contention between the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the SBC. These were among major reasons the BGCT voted in October to dramatically reduce its funding of the SBC seminaries.

Many Texas Baptists have objected to the revised document's omission of previous language that called Jesus "the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted," as well as new prohibitions on women serving as pastors. Critics of the document also have faulted language that calls the "Baptist Faith and Message" an "instrument of doctrinal accountability," saying those words change it from a voluntary faith statement to a creed.

After a BGCT study committee unveiled its proposals for redirecting theological education funds last fall, 20 former professors at Southwestern signed a full-page ad in the Baptist Standard endorsing the shift in funding away from the SBC schools and toward three BGCT schools.

In the following weeks, those signers, particularly those who are retired faculty members, have been called unethical by the administrative leadership of the seminary.

Each of the retired faculty members received a letter from Hemphill's office dated Dec. 8 that said signing the Baptist Standard ad "seems to raise questions of ethical propriety."

"One must ask if any moral dilemma surfaced as you gave assent to this public declaration. One must ask how does one continue to accept the benefits and advantages sacrificially vested in retired faculty such as yourself, who seems to have abandoned or have little regard for our institution," the letter stated.

The letter then spelled out the estimated cost of retiree insurance benefits to be paid on the faculty member's behalf over the next decade.

"We hope your trust in and support for Southwestern will be soon restored," the letter concluded.

It was signed not only by Hemphill but by Gray; Hubert Martin, vice president for business affairs; Lawrence Klempanuer, vice president for student services; Jack Terry, vice president for institutional advancement; David Crutchley, dean of the School of Theology; Daryl Eldridge, dean of the School of Educational Ministries; and Benjamin Harlan, dean of the School of Church Music.

Asked about the letter, Hemphill said it was not intended to be a threat.

However, there's no guarantee that the seminary will be able to continue funding retiree medical insurance, he said. "Our commitment has been we will continue to provide this as long as the institution is financially able to do so. It's not a guarantee; that's clear. You can never guarantee it."

Retirees who were signers of the ad apparently did receive their annual Christmas checks from the seminary this year -- a longstanding tradition -- although some reported their checks were delayed as much as a week and a half longer than those sent to others.

The retired faculty members contend that the Christmas checks and the medical insurance are benefits guaranteed to them at the time of retirement and spelled out in the faculty manual.

## **Churches offer communities 'sense of place,' researchers say**

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Churches can aid their community by offering a needed sense of "place," according to researchers reporting during the fall meeting of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion in Houston.

"Time and memory are increasingly dislocated. Neither has a position in the world," said researcher Nancy Eisland of Atlanta. "Many people today don't have a historical sense of the long-term. They desire a sense of collectiveness and yet don't have the time to contribute to it."

Various studies of communities have found that churches help create historical memories for residents, Eisland and the other researchers said. These memories may be based in aspects of the church buildings or in the ceremonies and experiences that were shared in those buildings.

But there is "both a gift and a danger" in promoting a church's historical memory, Eisland said.

Dangers arise when the sense of historical place impedes progress or when communities undergo change that the church doesn't embrace, she noted.

"What people project is that God was in the perfection of the past when in fact God may be in the possibilities of the future," she said.

"Congregations can hold a sense of place, but only so long as they do not succumb to a romantic notion." When communities change, existing churches often stay in those communities even though the congregation is made up of people who have left the community, the researchers noted.

And churches often remain in buildings that are not ideally located for their current members or require intensive maintenance, said Gaynor Yancey, a social work professor at Baylor University.

Yancey and Ram Cnaan of the University of Pennsylvania recently collaborated on a national study for the Partnership for Sacred Places of historical churches meeting in buildings constructed before 1940.

A primary question of the research, Yancey said, was "What are congregations doing in these communities that requires them to stay in this building?" And the answer, she reported, is that churches are providing vital community services. Ninety-three percent of the 111 congregations studied were providing at least one community service program in their buildings, and the remaining 7 percent were providing space for others to offer community service programs.

On average, these historic congregations each operated four ministries from their buildings.

"Congregations with older buildings host 76 percent of their communities' programs," Yancey reported. "The groups benefiting most are youth and children." This sense of place -- and the accompanying commitment to serve a community -- is stronger than the economic forces that otherwise might drive a church away, she said. Twenty-one percent of these historic church buildings need major repairs, with costs estimated at \$225,000 per congregation on average.

It is in the best interest of community leaders to ensure that these congregations continue to feel their sense of place, Yancey said. "If these congregations aren't there, who will provide these services?"

The challenge of how churches face up to changing communities while attempting to retain their own sense of place is clearly illustrated in Houston, added Paula Pipes of the University of Houston.

Pipes has conducted an in-depth study of churches in the Spring Branch community of Houston. Spring Branch lies west of downtown Houston, just north of I-10 and has undergone a dramatic shift since the early 1980s from a high-rent district to a low-rent district and from a largely Anglo community to a community of mixed ethnicity.

She illustrated the challenge to the churches' sense of place by recounting a conversation among six pastors of Anglo churches seated around a table in one of her focus groups.

"The ministers were describing the rapid increase in the number of ethnic congregations around them," she said. "The conversation turned to a discussion of the expensive homes being built in the area and the potential for revitalization. Suddenly, one pastor communicated an underlying and perhaps unsettled question in this community: 'Whose place is it?'" The pastor then explained: "What would the ministers of these immigrant fellowships that are springing up like mushrooms say about us? They might say, 'Oh, my God, here comes some more white folk.' That's a detriment to them. This is a different neighborhood now. In some ways, we're guests. In some ways, they're guests. I don't know who's hosting who or who is reaching out to who."

A primary focus of Pipes' research was "How have the churches originally established to serve Anglo residents responded to the changes in Spring Branch?" She identified four responses among the churches: Start mission congregations; host mission congregations inside the church's existing building; recruit the newcomers as members of the existing church; or make no attempt at incorporating the newcomers.

Each approach produces different results, Pipes noted. "Churches that include new immigrants as members provide a place for social interaction and a sense of shared community across multiple groups. Churches that channel their resources into maintaining an energetic congregation for the Anglo population may help prevent ethnic succession in a community threatened by white flight. .

"Churches that adopt the host and mission models of incorporation help to nurture immigrant congregations through their infancy, a period in which the death rate of new organizations is much higher. Ironically, if a complete ethnic succession does occur, the mainline churches will have helped build the organizations that become their successors in the shifting ecology."

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## **Study links judge's religion with church-state rulings**

By Mark Wingfield

HOUSTON (ABP) -- A judge's own religion may influence how he or she rules in cases involving religious liberty, and the amount of that influence varies by denomination, according to new research by Barbara Yarnold of Florida International University.

Federal appeals court judges who are Baptist or Catholic, she finds, are more likely than other judges to take "pro-religion" positions in cases involving the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution.

Yarnold's findings are reported in the September 2000 issue of the Review of Religious Research. Her study analyzed 1,356 federal appeals court decisions between 1970 and 1990 in cases dealing specifically with either the First Amendment's free-exercise or establishment clause. She compared religious affiliation of judges with the outcomes of these cases.

Rulings that favored religious activity or expression were coded as "pro-religion," while cases that disallowed religious activity or expression were coded as "anti-religion."

"Baptist and Catholic judges were more likely to render decisions that were pro-religion in cases involving religious liberties than were other judges," Yarnold explained.

Lutheran judges were more likely to take an anti-religion position, although this tendency was not as statistically strong as the Baptist and Catholic finding.

Judges of all faiths were inclined toward a pro-religion position, Yarnold said, but only the Baptist and Catholic judges stood out with strong statistical significance.

"Being not religious did not make a significant difference in the outcome, since the non-religious still, in general, adopted a pro-religion position," she added.

Also, "the fact that judges were of the same denominations as the ones concerned in the cases did not significantly increase the chances of winning, though it did make a pro-religion decision more likely."

Yarnold theorizes that Baptists and Catholics may be bent more toward affirming religious practice because of the minority status and persecution these religions have endured in the past.

Whether the findings of this study are good news or bad news depends entirely upon one's perspective, Yarnold said. "To those who tend to be more concerned with free exercise by this country's many religions, this outcome may be perfectly appropriate. To those who are more concerned with the non-establishment mandate of the First Amendment, these results may be troubling."

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## **Historical society reports banner year**

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. (ABP) -- Bolstered by a nearly 19 percent increase in voluntary donations, the Southern Baptist Historical Society finished 2000 in the black, according to a report by the group's executive director.

The largest increase came from the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which upped its contribution from \$10,000 in 1999 to \$25,000 last year, Charles Deweese reported in a recent paper. Overall, contributions accounted for 60 percent of the society's annual income of \$170,000, said Deweese. That included an \$18,000 donation in office space by the Tennessee Baptist Convention, where the society for Baptist historians has been housed for a year.

Other gifts came from Baptist state conventions, colleges and universities, churches and individuals, Deweese reported. Remaining income came mostly from dues, product sales and endowment funds.

Formed in 1938, the society functioned for many years as an auxiliary to the Southern Baptist Historical Commission, a Southern Baptist Convention agency dissolved in 1997. Since then, the Historical Society has functioned as an independent organization, hired two staff members and sought to broaden support in churches, associations and state conventions and seminaries.

In March, the society will hear a report from a committee studying the possible renaming of the organization to reflect its broadened constituency. The annual meeting, scheduled March 22-24 at First Baptist Church in Pensacola, Fla., will examine a theme of "Baptists and World War II." Papers will focus on Baptist women, blacks, music identity issues and other topics, Deweese said.

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-- By ABP staff

## **News briefs from Associated Baptist Press**

### **Richmond seminary honors president on 10th anniversary**

RICHMOND, Va. -- Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond honored President Tom Graves' 10th anniversary by pledging to name the Virginia seminary's main building after him.

The executive committee of the seminary's board of trustees honored Graves at a meeting Jan. 11. Graves, a former pastor and professor, became the seminary's first full-time president Jan. 14, 1991.

"Tom took a giant risk in leaving a happy and secure pastorate to take a big job that was very much in doubt," remarked Elmer West of Richmond, Va., who served on a presidential search committee that recommended Graves. "It's obvious now that he was the perfect choice.

The trustee committee announced that at an appropriate future date, the seminary's building would be renamed Graves Hall in "honor of the seminary's founding president and in recognition of his excellent leadership."

The executive committee also announced that the school surpassed a five-year fund-raising goal of \$10 million in its "Building the Dream" capital campaign. (ABP)

### **Baylor graduate wins high honor**

WACO, Texas -- A Baylor University graduate is among 40 U.S. students to receive a 2001 Marshall scholarship, one of the highest academic honors awarded to undergraduate students.

The \$50,000 scholarships funded by the British government allow gifted American students to study for two or three years at a British University.

Cinnamon Gilbreath, who is now a third-year law student at the University of California-Berkeley, plans to continue her studies in environmental change and management at Oxford.

Her father, Kent Gilbreath, is a professor of economics at Baylor, a Baptist-affiliated school in Waco, Texas. (ABP)

### **Church adding dot.com to name**

GRAPEVINE, Texas -- Drawing attention to its new beefed-up Internet site, a Texas mega-church has tacked dot.com onto its name.

Signs on the buildings of Fellowship Church in Grapevine, Texas, will read: fellowshipchurch.com, as will all the printed materials, said Preston Mitchell, pastor of spiritual development.

The congregation, which has a weekly attendance of about 12,000, will debut its new Web site Feb. 15. Mitchell said it would be one of the best church Internet sites in the nation.

"We think this is going to be a wonderful ministry tool," senior pastor Ed Young Jr. told the Dallas Morning News. "To us, dot.com stands for dot.community: community with God through Christ, community in local venues, community in worldwide venues. It's all about community. (ABP)

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