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**Bush cites church-state partnership
among themes in inaugural address**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Echoing a campaign pledge to establish partnerships with private and religious organizations to combat social ills, President George W. Bush said, "Compassion is the work of a nation, not just a government," at his inauguration Jan. 20.

Throngs of both supporters and protestors braved cold and rain to watch as the former Texas governor was sworn in as the 43rd United States president. His father, former President George Bush, looked on, along with outgoing President Bill Clinton and former President Jimmy Carter.

"Some needs and hurts are so deep they will only respond to a mentor's touch or a pastor's prayer," Bush said. "Church and charity, synagogue and mosque, lend our communities their humanity, and they will have an honored place in our plans and in our laws."

The new chief executive pledged to build "a single nation of justice and opportunity." He added, "I know this is in our reach because we are guided by a power larger than ourselves who creates us equal in his image."

Bush has touted "charitable choice," using tax dollars to fund religious ministries that combat drug use, juvenile violence or other social problems. Despite critics who say such programs violate the separation of church and state, Bush has pushed forward, announcing recently that he would establish a White House office of "faith-based action."

The new president also focused on another social issue -- poverty -- in the 12-minute inaugural speech.

"In the quiet of American conscience, we know that deep, persistent poverty is unworthy of our nation's promise," he said. "And whatever our views of its cause, we can agree that children at risk are not at fault. Abandonment and abuse are not acts of God, they are failures of love."

"I can pledge our nation to a goal: when we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side," he said, in an allusion to Jesus' biblical parable of the Good Samaritan.

He also pledged to "reclaim America's schools" and to reform Social Security and Medicare. Bush's biggest cheers came after he pledged to reduce taxes.

The decidedly partisan crowd also showed disdain for outgoing President Bill Clinton. Some Bush backers bowed their heads as evangelist Franklin Graham led in prayer, and then later booed, hissed and cursed as images of Clinton and his wife, Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., were projected on large television screens.

Meanwhile, anti-Bush protestors -- angry about the events surrounding the closest presidential election in American history -- displayed signs reading, "Gore Got More" and "Hail to the Thief."

Bush, a Methodist who in an early campaign debate cited Jesus Christ as his favorite political philosopher, made a number of religious references in his speech.

"Americans are generous and strong and decent, not because we believe in ourselves, but because we hold beliefs beyond ourselves," he said. "When this spirit of citizenship is missing, no government program can replace it. When this spirit is present, no wrong can stand against it."

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James Dunn opposes Ashcroft nomination

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Longtime Baptist agency head James Dunn opposed former Sen. John Ashcroft's confirmation as attorney general in a Senate Judiciary Committee hearing Jan. 19, claiming the appointment would pose a threat to religious freedom.

"I have concluded, and I know you don't all agree with this, that Sen. Ashcroft has an extremist philosophy regarding the First Amendment," Dunn told senators.

Dunn, who since retiring as executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee works as professor of Christianity and public policy at Wake Forest University, said he opposed the nomination because of Ashcroft's record on the separation of church and state.

Ashcroft's record demonstrates he is "unqualified and unreliable" to serve as attorney general and has "amply demonstrated that he does not understand the first freedom," Dunn alleged.

"It seems to me that he just doesn't get it," Dunn said.

"Either he has a blind spot, a lapse, or he's one of those who would intentionally destroy the separation of church and state as we have known it in this country," Dunn said.

Dunn cited Ashcroft's support for "charitable choice" initiatives designed to make tax dollars available to pervasively sectarian organizations including churches.

"We believe that the dumping of tax dollars on faith-based programs is dangerous," Dunn said, describing church-state separation as "the greatest contribution of the United States to the science of government."

Dunn said the separation of church and state "has been good for both the church and the state."

He also criticized Ashcroft's successful effort in Missouri to exempt church-based day care centers from fire, safety and health standards required for other childcare providers.

"Dog pounds in that state have more regulation than church-run day cares," Dunn said.

Dunn, who remains related to the Baptist Joint Committee as its chief fund raiser, told senators he was speaking only for himself and not in an official capacity.

Dunn said he is familiar but troubled with the tradition that senators typically confirm former colleagues for cabinet appointments even if they disagree with their views.

"I see the possibility that the United States Senate could sacrifice religious liberty, civil rights and civil liberties on the altar of senatorial civility," he said.

Sens. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, and Jon Kyl, R-Ariz., both said for the record they disagreed with Dunn's characterization of Ashcroft's record. Kyl termed Dunn's comments "biased and extremist."

Dunn responded that the remarks criticized by Kyl were "verbatim out of Supreme Court decisions." He also suggested that Congress has "yet to have a meaningful debate" on problems associated with charitable choice and urged both houses to "do your homework" on the subject.

"I don't think we've yet begun to debate the charitable-choice issue," he said.

Other panel members alluded to allegations by some that Ashcroft -- a devout Pentecostal Christian -- was being criticized because of his religious views.

Sen. Dick Durbin, D-Ill., said Ashcroft is rightfully proud of his religious heritage and beliefs. "I frankly do not know the tenets of his religion," Durbin said. "I don't think anyone in the course of this hearing has raised any question about Sen. Ashcroft's religious beliefs or should they. That is not relevant to this debate. What is relevant is the public record of John Ashcroft."

Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., said some have accused the Senate of "religious profiling" or inappropriate inquiry about Ashcroft's religious views. "It is important to give Americans assurance that this is not what is going on here," he said.

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Bush faith-sharing story urban myth, experts report

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- Two Internet research sites have labeled a story circulating about President George W. Bush recently leading a teenager to Christian faith as a hoax.

According to the story making the rounds via e-mail, then president-elect Bush attended a thank-you banquet for campaign volunteers the last week in December. While greeting guests, he met a woman who brought her 16-year-old son. Asked by Bush if he was a Christian, the youth replied he didn't think so. After that, Bush is said to have asked, "Do you mind if I tell you how I came to know Christ as my Savior?" and then proceeded to witness to the boy for 30 minutes, eventually leading him to recite the "sinner's prayer."

While not questioning Bush's religious faith or commitment to personal evangelism, two companies that specialize in debunking Internet hoaxes known as "urban legends" said they talked to Bush campaign insiders who knew nothing about the event. Urban Legends Reference Pages and Truth or Fiction.com also reported that while there was a thank-you banquet for campaign workers, it was delayed by the prolonged vote count and Bush did not attend. Further, given his tight schedule, they said it is unlikely that Bush's handlers would have allowed him to spend 30 minutes with one person even if he wanted to.

The Texas newspaper Baptist Standard also tried to track down the story and could find no evidence that it is true. The Standard made two calls to the Bush-Cheney transition team's communication office specifically seeking clarification on the Internet story. Those calls were not returned.

The Standard also attempted to contact Jeff Benoit of Austin, the person credited in the e-mail message as the source of the account about Bush. The Austin phone books lists only one person by such a name, and he did not return a call to confirm the story.

In an article posted on the Urban Legends Reference Pages, Barbara Mikkelson explained fascination with such apocryphal stories.

"Tales that seek to highlight the sterling qualities of incoming presidents provide ways for supporters to proclaim that their man is not like the bum leaving office and thus are a time-honored tradition no matter who is on his way out and who is on his way in," she wrote.

"Such tales also work to reassure folks, both those who voted for the newcomer and those who didn't, that this new man is a decent sort of guy and that he will do right by the country."

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Baptist leader criticizes Texas prison proposal

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A Baptist leader is criticizing a Texas proposal for building new prisons as a "return to a warehouse mentality" in criminal justice.

Gov. Rick Perry's proposed state budget calls for \$95 million in prison construction, while neglecting personnel and programs, says a former chaplain who coordinates prison ministries for the state's Baptists.

"In this budget proposal, we see treatment programs in prisons severely taking a backseat to buildings and beds," said Jim Young, coordinator of restorative-justice ministries with the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"The 'lock 'em up and throw away the key' approach just doesn't work," Young said. "We can't build our way out of the prison problem."

Young said prisons should instead be exploring alternative-sentencing options, enhancing opportunities for faith-based volunteers to become involved with inmates and parolees and encouraging church-sponsored programs that give inmates a sense of hope.

Because Texas has made it easier to revoke parole, the system is filling with non-violent offenders who would fare better in alternative programs than alongside career criminals.

"We are creating an academy of crime by bringing together hardened criminals and technical offenders," he said.

Young also criticized the budget for including no raises for state employees, aggravating an existing shortage of corrections workers. Entry-level pay for a prison guard is \$21,000 a year, he said, making it difficult to recruit and retain quality people.

"The adversarial relationship between guards and prisoners is heightened when you have frustrated, disgruntled correctional officers confronting frustrated and disgruntled offenders," Young said.

Young said church volunteers provide hope for both officers and inmates. Studies show that morale improves and disciplinary problems decrease when faith-based volunteers are invited to lead Bible studies or chapel services in prisons.

Restrictive policies, however, limit contact between volunteers and inmates, and some wardens have eliminated volunteer programs completely over security concerns, Young said, creating a "Catch 22" situation.

"The warden drops volunteer programs because of security concerns, since he can't hire enough correctional officers," he explained. "And because the inmates have no programs to look forward to, security deteriorates further."

Young called on corrections officials to "do a more effective job through the use of community volunteers" by limiting "bureaucracy and arbitrary decisions of wardens."

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News briefs from Associated Baptist Press

Texas moderate group asks state to refuse SBC funding

DALLAS -- The executive board of Texas Baptists Committed voted 60-3 to formally ask the Baptist General Convention of Texas to "divest" of almost \$1.4 million in annual funding it receives from the Southern Baptist Convention.

The group, formed to protect the state convention against takeover by fundamentalists, said Texas Baptists should give back \$1.3 million a year it gets from the SBC North American Mission Board and more than \$96,000 from LifeWay Christian Resources, the SBC's publishing arm. Proponents said the step would be for the sake of "ethics and integrity."

Funds from NAMB are typically matched with state convention monies for joint funding of projects, such as church starting. In smaller conventions, NAMB often sends more funds to the state than it receives back from the state's churches. In large states like Texas, however, the reverse is true.

Texas wouldn't be the first large state to renegotiate its arrangement with NAMB. Mississippi Baptists several years ago began withholding dollars equal to the amount it formerly received from NAMB in order to give state leadership more flexibility in how to use those funds.

Funding from LifeWay is used to supplement discipleship programs at state conventions, such as training leaders how to use SBC study materials. Since the BGCT now publishes its own Sunday school materials, Baptists Committed members reason, continuing to accept SBC funding creates a conflict of interest for convention workers who may feel pressured to promote LifeWay curriculum.

Texas Baptist officials did not comment publicly on the proposal. A BGCT committee is currently evaluating the state convention's missions partnerships, including those with NAMB and the SBC International Mission Board. (ABP)

Leading Texas church severs SBC ties

HOUSTON -- Houston's 3,500-member South Main Baptist Church voted Jan. 21 to sever 96-year-old ties to the Southern Baptist Convention.

By a vote of 330-9 at its quarterly business meeting, church members voted "with regret" to discontinue affiliation with the largest U.S. Protestant denomination over differences with the SBC's new doctrinal litmus test, the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

The church, which now funds about 97 percent of its worldwide missions efforts through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, will continue to honor members' requests to channel funds to SBC agencies. South Main will continue to affiliate with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Union Baptist Association. (ABP)

Weather-related crash kills Baptist worker

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. -- An Arkansas Baptist State Convention employee died Jan. 1 from injuries sustained in a weather-related car crash during personal travel over the holidays. The crash also claimed the life of his mother-in-law, a passenger.

Jim Hausler, 63, was church-starter strategist with the state convention's missions ministries team. A former Southern Baptist missionary to Paraguay and Argentina, he also headed Arkansas Baptists' language-ministry program.

Hausler and his wife, Jean, were driving her mother, Opal Young, home to Lubbock, Texas, following a holiday visit Dec. 27. Near Eufala, Okla., their car skidded on an icy road while trying to avoid a seven-car pileup and collided with the rear of a tractor-trailer. Jean Hausler was hospitalized overnight with injuries. Her mother died from head and internal injuries a few hours after the crash.

Hausler's supervisor, Jimmy Barrentine, described him, borrowing from a quotation in the Bible, as "a man of integrity" who "reverenced God in an extraordinary way." (ABP)

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