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**Memo from Baptist state office
stirs controversy over Ashcroft**

By Bob Allen

COLUMBIA, S.C. (ABP) -- A South Carolina Baptist Convention employee who sent an e-mail urging churches to endorse attorney general nominee John Ashcroft acted without clearance from supervisors, a convention spokesman said Jan. 29.

Joe Mack, director of South Carolina Baptists' Christian Life Concerns Department, sent an "action alert" memo dated Jan. 26 on convention letterhead. It said the Washington office of the Southern Baptist Convention Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission had asked South Carolinians to call Sen. Fritz Hollings' office and ask him to support Ashcroft's nomination. Hollings, a Democrat, earlier announced he would oppose confirmation of the appointment by President George W. Bush.

The memo included a phone number that reportedly rings directly in Hollings' office. "Please keep calling until you get through," the memo to "concerned citizens" suggested.

"I am asking all pastors to make this announcement from the pulpit this Sunday and to provide the senator's phone number to the congregation," Mack wrote. "We need to flood the Washington office with calls ... until the confirmation vote is taken."

Following news reports including comments criticizing the memo, convention officials issued a statement clarifying that Mack's memo went out through his office "without official clearance from the convention."

"The South Carolina Baptist Convention, through its Christian Life and Public Affairs Committee, studies and may make recommendations regarding moral concerns of public interest," read the Jan. 29 statement by Scott Vaughan, director of marketing. "However, this work does not include taking positions on political issues; nor does this work speak for or against the endorsement of political candidates or political appointees."

"Any decision you make to engage the political process, including the confirmation of Mr. Ashcroft, will be an independent decision of yourself and your local congregation," the statement said.

Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he does not endorse candidates for office, either, but he supports the Ashcroft nomination because he believes opponents are using "religious profiling" against the former senator.

"If the people who want to practice anti-evangelical bigotry are successful, they will continue to do so, and the only way they will continue to do so is if the evangelicals are silent," the Columbia, S.C., newspaper The State quoted Land as saying.

Land reportedly told the newspaper that the ELRC's Washington office had sent two memos to state Baptist offices. The second went out in late January to states whose senators were undecided on Ashcroft: South Carolina, Arkansas, Georgia, Louisiana, Missouri and New Mexico.

Associated Baptist Press obtained a forwarded copy of a Jan. 10 e-mail titled addressed to 50 leaders in the various Baptist state conventions. The memo, attributed to Shannon Royce, the ERLC's director of government relations and legislative counsel, said Ashcroft's opponents have "tried to vilify him" and engaged in "religious bigotry."

"Sen. Ashcroft is a just man with impeccable integrity who is imminently qualified for this position," the three-page memo stated. It urged Baptists to "pray for a just outcome in the confirmation process," to call and write senators in support of Ashcroft and to "forward this alert to other like-minded believers."

Land said he didn't know what message had been sent to South Carolina pastors but that he would consider sending an e-mail to be an appropriate action.

Some South Carolina Baptists, however, objected to receiving the e-mail from the state convention.

"It raises the hair on the back of my Baptist neck," said Fred Andrea, pastor of First Baptist Church in Aiken, S.C., quoted in the Baptist Center for Ethics electronic newsletter. "Identifying the election of a candidate with the specific will of God is dangerously un-Baptist behavior," continued Andrea, whose church members include Sen. Strom Thurmond, R-S.C.

Andrea said his objection has nothing to do with the nominee. "An encouragement to endorse a nominee violates our historic understanding of Baptist polity," he said.

Doug Cole, leader of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina's Christian Life Team, said he ignored the memo from the SBC office. "We have never, as a state convention, endorsed any political candidate, nor will we," he said. "It is a violation of our position in support of the separation of church and state."

Robert Parham, executive director of the Nashville, Tenn.,-based Baptist Center for Ethics, said the episode is evidence "that the fundamentalist-controlled Southern Baptist Convention is joined at the hip to the right wing of the Republican Party."

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-- Steve DeVane and Sarah Griffith contributed to this report.

Virginia pastor resigns to lead Leland Center

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A northern Virginia pastor is leaving his church to become president of the John Leland Center for Theological Studies.

Randel Everett, senior pastor at Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., has announced his resignation, effective March 1. He described the transition as a step forward in fulfilling a Baptist vision

dating back to the early 19th Century for a Baptist theological institution in the nation's capital.

Everett, who had been volunteering his time as acting president of the Leland Center, told ABP that he personally came to a place "where I couldn't give Columbia the time it needed or the Leland Center the time it needed." Everett said a donor made a three-year pledge to underwrite his salary for the Leland post.

He announced the decision to the church Jan. 14. His last day in the pulpit will be Feb. 18. In addition, Everett will be one of several people helping to begin a new church in the Georgetown area of Washington, D.C.

Seminary trustees unanimously approved Everett's election "with gratitude to God and believing that we are being led by the Holy Spirit," according to a statement.

As full-time president, Everett said he hopes to "solidify our core faculty and our core curriculum."

The Leland Center has grown rapidly since its inception in 1997. It will graduate its first students in the summer of 2002. Then it expects to apply for membership in the Association of Theological Schools, the accrediting agency for all seminaries in North America and Canada. The Leland Center has about 75 students, nearly a 50 percent increase from student totals in 1999.

The center has relied on partnerships and resources of nearby groups including the Baptist Joint Committee, the Baptist World Alliance, Prison Fellowship, the District of Columbia Baptist Convention, the Mount Vernon Baptist Association and many local churches. These groups have provided not only natural partnerships for student internships but also faculty members.

Everett said he also sees the move as a chance to build new partnerships. While the center has survived on a small budget from tuition payments, individual donors and the local Baptist conventions, Everett said, "We're going to have to find new funding sources." He welcomed conversations with groups, such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as well as state Baptist conventions.

CBF recently approved a statement that would bar funding groups that endorse or promote homosexuality -- a statement Everett says he agrees with. While the Leland Center doesn't have a specific policy on homosexuality, all students must receive the endorsement of their church to be accepted into the school.

"We don't have a litmus test that we're going to be asking students when they come," Everett said. "We want them to have a strong commitment to Christ."

"I'm really conservative theologically," he added. "I think we need a school that will equip people for evangelical churches in our area."

Baptists first dreamed of establishing a theological school in the nation's capital in the 1820s. Luther Rice, a Baptist denominational leader and promoter of missions in the early 1800s, was a strong advocate of the starting of Baptist colleges in the United States, beginning with Columbian College in Washington in 1821.

The school, intended as a national institution that would unite a widely spread Baptist denomination, quickly ran into financial problems. Eventually it severed all ties with Baptists and became known as George Washington University in 1903.

While Rice's vision for a theological school may have never died among Baptists in Washington, it has undergone changes. Rather than emphasizing its denomination, the Leland Center is geared toward connecting theological education to the local church and meeting the changing needs of ministers.

Everett said the Leland Center is "church-focused," with a goal of creating religious leaders to meet the needs of the Washington area.

The "post-modern generation has been neglected by our churches," he said, and the Leland Center hopes to prepare young people to lead evangelical churches in the area.

Bush says faith sustains him, at first prayer breakfast

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Speaking at his first National Prayer Breakfast as president Feb. 1, George W. Bush described a personal faith that has sustained him "in moments of success and in moments of disappointment."

"Without it, I'd be a different person," he added. "And without it, I doubt I'd be here today."

In speaking to the annual bipartisan event, Bush did not shy away from touting an initiative that has split the religious community. Bush said his faith-based initiative -- which would provide tax funds to religious social service ministries and provide incentives for more charitable giving -- would work to "encourage the inspirer and help the helper."

"Government cannot be replaced by charities, but it can welcome them as partners instead of resenting them as rivals," Bush said. He pledged not to "favor religious institutions over non-religious" ones.

"I'm interested in what is constitutional and in what works," Bush said. "The days of discriminating against religious institutions simply because they are religious must come to an end," the president said to the strongest and longest applause of his speech.

Bush quoted civil-rights martyr Martin Luther King Jr., who preached that "the church must be reminded that it is not the master or the servant of the state -- but the conscience of the state."

Ironically, religious and civil-liberties groups opposed to "charitable choice" provisions of the Bush plan on constitutional grounds have charged that funding religious groups will lead to exactly what King was preaching against in the statement.

"Charitable choice threatens to make religion the servant of the state, rather than its conscience," said Wanda Henry of the Baptist Joint Committee at a press conference in opposition to portions of the Bush plan.

Other religious groups back the plan as a way to fund what works and to put religious groups on equal footing with secular ones without having to change their religious character to receive tax dollars.

But even some conservatives are raising fears about regulations that may follow federal dollars to churches. For example, Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, says he would prefer the money go in the form of a voucher to beneficiaries of the services rather than to the church.

Bush told the audience faith has sustained the life of the nation. "Men and women can be good without faith, but faith is a force of goodness. Men and women can be compassionate without faith, but faith often inspires compassion. Human beings can love without faith but faith is a great teacher of love."

He said while the nation "does not impose any religion, we welcome all religions. We do not prescribe any prayer; we welcome all prayer."

Bush said the president serves "people of every faith and serves some of no faith at all. Yet I have found my faith helps me in the service to people. Faith teaches humility."

Bush also asked for civility in policy debates. "We will have our disagreements, ... civility does not require us to abandon our beliefs," he said. "But it does mean that our public debate ought to be free from bitterness and anger and rancor." He noted that the Book of James reminds that "fresh water and salt water cannot flow from the same spring."

The prayer breakfast dates back to 1952 when a group of lawmakers gathered to pray for newly elected President Dwight D. Eisenhower.

Bushes worship first at black Methodist church

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Following advice that a predominantly African-American church in the District of Columbia would tend to be more theologically conservative than a predominantly white one, President George W. Bush and his wife, Laura, attended Sunday services Jan. 28 at Lincoln Park United Methodist Church in northeast Washington.

Mark Tooley, director of the Institute for Religion and Democracy -- a conservative think tank -- told Associated Baptist Press he made the recommendation. He later received a thank-you note from Bush. Tooley told ABP he thought the Bushes would continue to visit different churches before choosing one that they will attend regularly.

While Tooley would not release his personal letter to Bush, he pointed to his recent piece in the Wall Street Journal, "making roughly the same points," he said.

In that piece, Tooley said that President Clinton's church -- Foundry Methodist Church -- was led by pastor Philip Wogaman, who "vigorously defended President Clinton during the Monica scandal."

"A proponent of abortion rights and gay marriage, Wogaman says he has invited Bush to attend Foundry," Tooley continued. "But prominent Republicans have not fared well there. Bob and Elizabeth Dole, longtime Foundry attenders, very publicly left that church in 1995 when Foundry's theological and political stances became too far left.

"But Foundry Church, which President Rutherford B. Hayes also attended in the 1870s, is not unusual in the nation's capital. Most of the predominantly white Methodist churches in affluent northwest Washington are liberal. It is a different story for Washington's black Methodist churches, whose theology, if not their political affiliation, is usually more conservative."

Tooley mentioned the Lincoln Park church by name in the article. "But going to a black church would be more than a photo op. It also would fit better with Bush's very genuine evangelical faith," he wrote.

Tooley said Lincoln Park's preacher -- Harold Lewis -- "is a military veteran and Mississippi native. His revivalist preaching should appeal to Bush, who has publicly described Jesus Christ as his favorite philosopher."

Lewis, Tooley noted, "is affiliated with Methodism's pro-life caucus, although most denominational leaders are pro-choice. And his church gained attention last year when an outdoor sign advertised a sermon called 'Adam and Eve or Adam and Steve?'"

The city government later tore it down, claiming it violated historic-preservation standards.

News reports said the service lasted an hour and 45 minutes, punctuated with shouts of "Hallelujah," and "Yes, Lord." Bush and his family stood and swayed to the chorus: "I've got a feeling everything's going to be all right."

According to the news reports, Lewis told the congregation he voted for Al Gore but added that Bush "is our president."

"My team lost, but I'm a team player," Lewis added.

National Baptist Convention agency backs Ashcroft nomination

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- At a recent Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on the controversial nomination of former Sen. John Ashcroft to be U.S. attorney general, Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, released a letter endorsing the nomination from an agency of the predominantly African-American National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Inc.

The letter to Hatch, signed by Leonard L. J. Young, executive director of the denomination's Civil Rights and Equal Justice Commission, says, "The commission believes that Sen. Ashcroft's Christian faith and morality support his confirmation."

The National Baptist Convention claims 8.4 million members in 33,000 churches, making it America's third-largest religious denomination. NBC officials did not return phone calls from Associated Baptist Press. ABP also attempted to call Young's commission, but phone numbers listed on the letter to Hatch were no longer in service.

"Like the Assemblies of God Church in which Sen. Ashcroft's father and grandfather were ministers, our convention's believers are working-class Americans who share traditional Christian faith and moral beliefs," the letter said. "Our commission takes the position that strongly held religious faith should not be a disqualifying factor for attorney general or elected office."

Meanwhile, the U.S. Senate appeared ready to confirm Ashcroft Feb. 1 with some Democratic opposition but not enough to block the nomination. The Judiciary Committee approved his nomination 10-8 with one Democrat voting for Ashcroft. The ranking Democrat, Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., said he would oppose the nomination and criticized Ashcroft for unresponsive answers to questions posed by senators.

People For the American Way has led a coalition of civil-rights groups to oppose Ashcroft. Meanwhile, conservative religious advocacy groups have continued to back the nomination.

Baptists are split on the nomination. The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission is actively supporting the nomination.

The Baptist Joint Committee said it would not support or oppose the nomination but urged lawmakers to ask Ashcroft questions about his commitment to upholding the separation of church and state.

Also, James Dunn, the BJC's retired executive director and currently a professor at Wake Forest Divinity School, testified against Ashcroft at the Senate hearings. Dunn is also president of the BJC Endowment but said he was speaking only for himself in testimony.

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Texas moral-concerns official criticizes faith-based proposal

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Directing government funds to church-based social ministries could sap the vitality from those churches, warned Texas Baptists' top official for moral concerns.

Phil Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, responded to news that President George W. Bush had signed executive orders establishing a White House Office of Faith-based and Community Initiatives.

Strickland said giving tax dollars to ministries of "pervasively sectarian" organizations is not only bad public policy but also a bad policy for churches.

"Government funding will neuter the passion for churches to support their own ministries," he charged. "Churches will find little passion for giving or serving when they become government contractors."

Charitable choice also puts various churches and faith-based ministries in the role of competitors for available dollars, he said. "This competition will be destructive to the faith community."

He warned further that when tax dollars go to church ministries, it leads to unconstitutional entanglement of church and state. Government rules and regulations inevitably follow government funds, he observed.

"Shekels have shackles," Strickland said. "Government will wind up calling the shots. It's their money."

He said church members serving in the social ministries could potentially be prohibited from explicitly sharing their faith while delivering tax-funded services.

"What makes faith-based ministries successful is the ability to teach faith," Strickland noted.

Another pitfall, he said, is that government funds actually could be used to support the teaching of religious principles.

"I don't want my money going to the Branch Davidians or the Wiccans," Strickland said. "Nor do I want government placed in the position of choosing which are the 'good' churches and which are the 'bad' churches.

"If government money promotes religious instruction, it's unconstitutional," Strickland said. "If faith-based ministries fail to offer a religious message, they cease to be unique."

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