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Atlanta Association votes to keep congregations that affirm gays

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Atlanta Baptist Association voted Jan. 30 not to expel two gay-friendly churches. It is thought to be the first action by an ecclesiastical body recognized by the Southern Baptist Convention tolerating homosexuality.

The action prompted immediate talk of defections by conservative churches or even a formal split in the 153-church association.

According to news reports, Atlanta Baptists voted 253-164 by secret ballot to retain fellowship with Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., and Virginia-Highland Baptist Church in Atlanta, two churches ousted from the Georgia Baptist Convention in 1999 for their acceptance of gays.

Both churches welcome people who are openly gay and lesbian into their church membership and include them in leadership positions.

The vote, which followed almost a year of dialogue, says the association doesn't "support or condone homosexual activity" but "affirms the longstanding Baptist polity of local church autonomy," according to a news release.

According to a story in the Atlanta Journal-Constitution, some churches have indicated they are likely to leave the association in protest of the vote. If several do so, they might join together in a new association in the two-county area that makes up Atlanta Association.

Bobby Atkins, pastor of the 7,000-member Rehoboth Baptist Church was quoted as saying his church would likely discuss pulling out. He said he intended to bring the matter before the church's leadership.

"If this is the way the Atlanta Baptist Association wants to deal with this, what I think might happen ... is that there will be several churches that will say we can no longer be a part of that," Atkins said.

The vote could cost the association more than monies they receive from those churches. It also could raise questions about other funding in the form of partnerships with Georgia Baptists and the Southern Baptist Convention.

Baptist associations are regional groupings of Southern Baptist churches that also relate to a state convention and the SBC. While associations are autonomous from state and national bodies, their work is

closely intertwined. Member churches support them directly, but associations also receive denominational funding for certain programs.

The SBC North American Mission Board funds ministries in Atlanta Baptist Association through the Georgia Baptist Convention, which disburses NAMB funds for state programs as a missions partner. Those amounts were unavailable before this story's deadline.

Georgia Baptist president Bill Ricketts told Associated Baptist Press the Atlanta Association's action could potentially jeopardize its relationship with Georgia Baptists. "I definitely believe the convention will have to look at it," he said. "What they will do, I do not know."

The association's stance also differs from the Southern Baptist Convention, which forbids member churches that "affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

SBC president James Merritt, who is pastor of a church in a neighboring association, called the action "a sad commentary on the Atlanta Baptist Association."

"If this [homosexuality] doesn't disqualify you from membership in the association, what would?" Merritt asked in Baptist Press. "Can a church practice open adultery, polygamy, desecration of the Lord's Supper and be a part of the Atlanta Baptist Association?"

Baptist Press also quoted critical remarks by Robert White, executive director of the Georgia Baptist Convention. "The issue that concerns me is that it sends a signal not only to Atlanta and Georgia, but to the nation, that a group of Baptist churches in Atlanta has moved to affirm homosexuality," he said. "This sends a terrible signal."

"The crisis I see is that if you take the position of local church autonomy as more important than dealing with the problem of sin, then it creates a very dangerous situation for the church," White said. "Then you have churches that will make their own decisions about whether or not something is a sin."

The pastors of the two churches, however, deny both that their churches are unbiblical and that homosexuality is a sin.

"The idea there is only one interpretation of the word of God and that is mine" is un-Baptist, Oakhurst pastor Lanny Peters said in a 1999 press conference following his church's ouster from the Georgia convention. "Our congregation has studied the Bible and homosexuality 20 years."

Timothy Shirley, pastor of Virginia-Highland Baptist Church, said at the same conference that he believes sexual orientation is not a choice and therefore not a sin. "This issue is not about sin. It is about people," he said.

Neither Peters nor Shirley could be reached for comment. Joel Harrison, director of missions for Atlanta Baptist Association, did not return a reporter's call.

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Debate continues over Texas funding plan

DALLAS (ABP) -- Texas Baptists' vote last year to significantly reduce funding to the Southern Baptist Convention is a done deal, but debate continues.

Following up on a promise he made prior to last November's budget vote, SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman wrote 4,900 Texas Baptist churches directly in mid-January appealing to churches to fund SBC ministries directly.

The Baptist Standard ran a story about Chapman's letter Jan. 29 that included response by leaders of the Baptist General Convention of Texas. BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade acknowledged that

churches have the right to bypass the state convention, but reminded Baptists about BGCT ministries they would defund in the process.

In the same story, BGCT Treasurer Roger Hall pointed out that churches that no longer contribute to the state convention would no longer qualify for matching funds for ministerial retirement or for the BGCT's group tax-exempt certification.

That prompted a Baptist Press story criticizing Hall's statements as "misleading, at best." The story attributed that quote to Casey Perry, minister of church relations for the Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, a conservative group that supports SBC leaders.

Perry said the SBTC provides matching funds and protection benefits comparable to other Baptist state conventions through an agreement with the SBC Annuity Board.

The story also pointed out that churches can obtain tax-exempt status from the SBC.

After the story, the Baptist General Convention of Texas news office issued a release in which Hall was quoted as standing by his remarks, which he said were intended to "provide Texas Baptist churches with accurate and helpful information."

Hall said in the release that Baptist Press did not attempt to contact him for comment prior to the Jan. 29 story.

"Regarding the statements about matching funding and protection benefits provided by the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the group tax exemption offered to BGCT-affiliated churches and associations, at no time did I make any reference either to a competing state convention or to a national convention. The focus was upon services provided by the BGCT to supporting churches," he said.

He said the Texas convention earmarks \$1.6 million for the Ministers Protection Plan, which helps provide life and disability insurance for church workers and helps build benefits for their retirement through matching funds. Only churches that contribute an amount at least equal to the matching-fund payout to the state convention qualify for the program, however.

The other issue raised in the Baptist Press article concerned Hall's statement that if a church totally disassociates itself from the BGCT, it no longer qualifies for the state convention's group tax exemption.

"Since at least the 1940s, the BGCT has had a group ruling for tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service for its affiliated churches and associations," Hall said. "This allows churches not to file an annual report. We file for them. A church does not have to request this. It is automatically provided as a service by the BGCT to cooperating churches.

"As I stated earlier, if a church chose to no longer affiliate with the BGCT, it would need to make other arrangements."

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-- By ABP staff

Bush unveils faith-based initiative; critics raise church-state questions

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Pledging to "accept rather than dismiss" faith-based social programs, President George W. Bush has unveiled a sweeping initiative that would dramatically alter America's church-state relations.

The proposal, outlined in a 17-page document titled "Rallying the Armies of Compassion," contained several provisions, such as expanding "charitable choice" to all federal social spending, thereby making pervasively sectarian organizations such as churches eligible to compete for billions of tax dollars.

Another provision would encourage charitable giving by expanding the federal charitable tax deduction to the 80 million taxpayers who do not itemize when filing taxes.

Unveiling the plan and naming officials to head new faith-based offices, Bush said Jan. 29 the proposal would be "one of the most important initiatives that my administration not only discusses, but implements."

Bush said there are "deep needs and real suffering in the shadow of America's affluence," naming problems like addiction, gang violence and mental illness. "We will encourage faith-based and community programs without changing their mission," he said. "We will help all in their work to change hearts while keeping a commitment to pluralism."

Bush moved quickly to address concerns that critics are raising about the office, noting that "government will never be replaced by charities and community groups."

"Yet when we see social needs in America," he continued, "my administration will look first to faith-based programs and community groups, which have proven their power to save and change lives. We will not fund the religious activities of any group, but when people of faith provide social services, we will not discriminate against them."

While legislation will have to be drafted and approved by Congress before the initiative takes effect, Bush signed two executive orders to get the process rolling. In one order, he established the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to be headed by former University of Pennsylvania Professor John DiIulio. The office will report directly to Bush and will seek ways to remove barriers facing religious groups that want tax dollars.

The second executive order is designed to clear away the "bureaucratic barriers in several important agencies that make private groups hesitate to work with government." It will establish centers in five U.S. departments -- Justice, Housing and Urban Development, Health and Human Services, Labor and Education -- to ensure greater cooperation between the government and the independent sector.

Also, former Indianapolis Mayor Stephen Goldsmith -- once expected to lead the White House office -- will stay on as an adviser to Bush on the issue.

Civil and religious liberties organizations held press conferences to attack the proposal on church-state grounds.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, called the plan "an unprecedented merger of church and state."

AU was joined by 18 organizations in signing a letter to Bush raising constitutional concerns. Groups signing the letter included the Baptist Joint Committee.

In a separate press statement, BJC Executive Director Brent Walker said, "President Bush is trying to do right, but he's going about it in the wrong way." Walker said the BJC opposes charitable choice because "of our religious conviction and our desire to maintain religious freedom."

Walker said funding religious ministries with tax dollars threatens houses of worship with government audits and reviews and will lead to unhealthy competition among religious groups for a share of limited dollars.

BJC Administrator Wanda Henry gave a piece of advice to church leaders: "Say 'no thank you' to government funds for your religious ministries. You are doing just fine without the heavy hand of government on your back."

Henry pointed to the words of slain civil rights leader Martin Luther King Jr. who preached that "the church is not the master of the state, nor the servant of the state, but the conscience of the state."

"Charitable choice threatens to make religion the servant of the state, rather than its conscience," she added.

Henry and Walker said there are "right" ways that government and faith-based organizations could partner. For example, under existing law, houses of worship can spin off separate nonprofit groups (like Catholic Charities) that could receive tax dollars if certain regulations were followed. Walker also praised the Bush plan to allow non-itemizers, which comprise about 70 percent of taxpayers, to deduct charitable giving from their income.

The BJC is often criticized by its conservative Baptist counterparts for supporting a strict wall of separation between church and state. But Southern Baptist Convention officials also raised constitutional concerns in press releases.

Southern Baptist North American Mission Board's president, Robert Reccord, expressed gratitude for a president "who sees value in faith-based ministry" and optimism about proposals "to end the federal government's discrimination against faith-based organizations." But he added, "Faith-based ministries need to proceed with caution."

"There can be a tendency over time for the government to attempt to control that which it subsidizes," Reccord said. "Great wisdom will be required on this journey."

Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission head, Richard Land, said he believes the proposal can be set up in a constitutional manner but listed "ground rules" that must be met. Land said:

- There must be a viable secular alternative.

- No religious group should be restricted or discriminated against in the distribution of funds.

- Government aid must go only for the nonreligious aspects of the program.

- It should "voucherize" the intended beneficiaries of the funds, empowering individuals to determine which provider to choose.

Land said if the government attempts to censor the religious message of a group, then that ministry "should never, under any circumstances, accept the money."

The White House quickly dispatched Goldsmith and DiIulio to conferences and media outlets to quell fears about church-state concerns in the plan.

Goldsmith told reporters at a White House briefing that Bush believes "that government money should not fund religion, period, that it is legitimate and appropriate for government to fund shelter care or food for those in need, but not to fund the Bibles, not to fund the crosses, not to fund the stars of David or whatever. So no money for religion."

But the religious element of programs qualifying for funding under charitable choice is precisely what supporters say makes them effective. And many Christian evangelicals backing the idea have in the past voiced anger that crosses had to come down from walls and Bibles had to be removed from programs funded by government.

At a panel discussion on the issue sponsored by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Jim Wallis, Call to Renewal convener, said programs like Teen Challenge or Victory Outreach "where the drug, rehabilitation is more tied up with the religious message or conversion" will be "the harder case" than church programs that for example provide medical supplies to need facilities.

The Bush administration's pledge not to fund proselytization did not allay the fears of members of Congress who fear civil rights are in jeopardy under the program.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., said the law does not need to be changed to fund the secular services faith-based groups could provide. The problem, he said, is that charitable choice would change the law to allow funds to go to groups that cannot separate their religious mission.

Scott said it is clear that proselytization occurs in charitable choice programs, or their sponsors would not have provided exemptions for those receiving the help to remove themselves from a program and go to a secular one. "What are they exempting themselves from if there's not proselytization going on," he asked.

Eugene Rivers, founder of the Ten Point Coalition and pastor of the Azusa Christian Community in Dorchester, Mass., responded to the issue by saying that groups should "be judged based on performance and results -- not religion. Now, if our sin is that our religion can produce the results, then we plead guilty."

Lawmakers opposed to charitable choice have been fighting lonely battles as Congress has overwhelmingly approved such plans in recent years dating back to the 1996 welfare-reform package.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, said it would be an uphill battle in Congress to defeat the proposal but said progress is being made on educating lawmakers on the issue.

Edwards told ABP that "initially Bush will pass these proposals very quickly -- that's what Mr. Madison and Mr. Jefferson built in religious protections into the Bill of Rights so that quick decisions by the president and Congress can't override that fundamental right."

Ultimately, Edwards predicted, "this will be resolved in the courts."

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Elements of Bush faith-based initiative

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The following information is taken from White House documents and includes some of the provisions of President George W. Bush's recently announced faith-based initiative. The proposal would:

- Grant a federal charitable deduction for the 80 million taxpayers -- 70 percent of all filers who do not currently itemize tax returns.

- Expand "charitable choice" provisions to all federal social spending to enable religious organizations to compete with secular ones for tax dollars.

- Encourage states to provide a credit (of up to 50 percent of the first \$500 for individuals and \$1,000 for married couples and corporations) against state income or other taxes for contributions to charities addressing poverty and its impact.

- Permit corporations to deduct charitable donations until their value exceeds 15 percent of the company's taxable income, instead of the current 10 percent.

- Match private giving with federal dollars to help community and faith-based charities increase their capacity, competence and programs as well as providing start-up capital to enable smaller groups to expand or emulate programs.

- Provide funds for states to establish pilot maternity group homes.

- Establish the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives to establish and expand partnerships with private and religious charities.

- Make federal agencies more receptive to faith-based and community based solutions.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

White House official, religious leaders, lawmakers debate merits of Bush plan

By Jeff Huett

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Heated debate consumed a discussion about President George W. Bush's plan to increase the ability of faith-based groups to get tax dollars as a panel of lawmakers, religious leaders and the head of a new White House office discussed the broad implications of the "charitable choice" idea.

The panel, sponsored by The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, was the first in a series on the new White House proposals.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va, a critic of the Bush plan, said charitable choice could "turn back the clock to when you could discriminate against people based on their religion." Scott was referring to language in the plan that he said would open the door for faith-based groups receiving federal funds to discriminate in hiring based on religious beliefs.

Houses of worship have long been exempt from certain civil rights laws, enabling them to hire only people who share their religious views. Charitable choice would be the first measure that would allow federal dollars to flow to groups that could then discriminate in hiring employees based on religion.

"There is specific language in every bill that I've seen on charitable choice that specifically provides that religious discrimination is OK," Scott said. "Now once you have torn down that barrier, it doesn't take a rocket scientist to figure out that enforcing racial discrimination is going to be virtually impossible."

Scott also expressed concerns about the government's role in deciding which groups receive tax-payer funds, which he says could violate the establishment clause of the U.S. Constitution. "We've asked specific questions and have gotten vague answers," he said.

But John DiIulio, the University of Pennsylvania professor who Bush tapped to head the new White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives, took a more "inductive" view of Bush's plan. While warning against stumbling over philosophical disagreements, he said there has to be "a degree of trust" in the discussion.

"The spirit of this ought to be, not 'let's get to the letter of the law,'" he said, [but] "let's look at how we can get things done together. Let's have that fight, but let's keep looking for how we can come together to do the things we all agree ought to be done and not leave anyone out who wants the help."

A similar view was expressed by Jim Wallis, editor of Sojourners magazine and convener of Call to Renewal. Wallis said he has come to the conclusion that there is a way to perform the faith-based initiatives in a manner consistent with the First Amendment. But he suggested that the focus of the debate be on neighborhoods and the people served, not just on issues relating to the separation of church and state.

"I want to plead that the church-state arguments not be the only issue here or the heart of the issue that we try to keep our eyes on the prize, which are those neighborhoods, those families and those kids."

This comment drew a comment from Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, who questioned Wallis' characterization of the First Amendment as secondary to the issue.

"America's gift of religious freedom is one of the most wonderful gifts our democracy has given to the world and we should tinker with that principle with great trepidation," said Edwards, who was in attendance, though not on the panel.

Richard Foltin, legislative director and counsel of the American Jewish Committee, joined Scott in opposition to the charitable-choice initiative, saying, in part, that faith-based groups providing social services will not be able to separate their religious teaching mission from the services they provide. In addition, he said, possible "rifts" between faith groups battling for government money could occur.

These arguments, and many others about charitable choice, said minister Eugene Rivers, are merely "inside the beltway" arguments made by the "policy-political elite" who do not take into account programs that work.

Rivers, founder of the Ten Point Coalition in Boston, said that most poor people live beyond the borders of this "class-based, ideologically charged political discussion that rarely factors in the life, death, experiences and challenges of, in my case, the black poor."

Though he believes the debate will continue, DiIulio said the time for action is now. "There are concerns. There are limitations, and there are debates we ought to have," DiIulio said. But "everybody's got to bend a little to get on point and get on mission, because if all the debate goes on two, three, five, seven years now and we still can say we don't have universal access to literacy and still we can say there are prisoners' children without mentors, then what was the debate for?"

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-- Jeff Huett is associate communications director for the Baptist Joint Committee.

Senate confirms Ashcroft 58-42 to U.S. attorney general post

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Senate confirmed controversial conservative figure John Ashcroft to be U.S. attorney general but not before Democrats garnered more than 40 votes against the nomination, sending a signal that extremist conservative nominees to the Supreme Court from President George W. Bush would not be welcome.

The 58-42 vote came after Democrats opposed to Ashcroft agreed not use a filibuster to thwart a vote on the nomination. But Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., told reporters that his party would cooperate on moderate nominations in the future but would use "whatever means necessary" in the future to thwart nominations, particularly federal or Supreme Court justices whose views were on the far right.

Among those voting against Ashcroft was Sen. Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., Democratic vice presidential nominee in the close 2000 presidential election. While supporters of Ashcroft have charged that his opponents are targeting Ashcroft because of his conservative Christian views, Lieberman said that "it is Senator Ashcroft's record, not his religion, we should judge today," according to news reports.

"On issues ranging from civil rights to privacy rights, Senator Ashcroft has repeatedly taken positions considerably outside the mainstream of American thinking," said Lieberman.

Ashcroft came under fire for issues ranging from his anti-abortion stand to his past resistance to court rulings to end segregation in Missouri schools. He was also criticized for his handling of previous presidential nominations that came before him when he was a senator.

He opposed Clinton nominee James Hormel, the first openly gay U.S. ambassador but told the Senate Judiciary Committee it was not because he was homosexual despite comments he made when he was considering the nomination. Ashcroft also drew fire for killing the nomination of Ronnie White, a black Missouri Supreme Court judge who was up for a federal judgeship.

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

Ralph Neas, President of PFAW, issued a statement to the press following the Senate vote claiming a moral victory for the large coalition that formed to oppose the nomination. "Together we changed the debate," Neas said. "We pointed out John Ashcroft's very disturbing record on civil rights, reproductive rights, environmental protection, equality for gay Americans, and more."

Neas added: "Today is not the end of our work together. During the past five weeks, the progressive coalition has sent an exceptionally strong message to President Bush: When his administration tries to turn back the clock on our rights and freedoms, we will stand and fight."

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