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IN THIS ISSUE;

- Bush faith initiative meeting roadblocks**
- Denominational worker chooses church over job**
- Groups release guidelines on churches using tax funds**

Bush faith initiative meeting roadblocks

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Amid growing criticism from the Religious Right, Republican lawmakers are stalling implementation of President Bush's sweeping plan to expand "charitable choice" programs that provide government funding of religiously oriented social ministries.

A key backer of charitable choice, which would make it easier for religious organizations like churches to receive federal funds for social services like drug and alcohol rehabilitation, told the Washington Post the president's faith-based initiative would be broken into two parts.

The more controversial charitable-choice funding mechanism could be delayed for as long as a year, said Sen. Rick Santorum, R.-Pa. The Washington newspaper reported that the White House concurs with the delay, prompting claims of victory from critics who say the plan violates the separation of church and state.

"We've just finished round one, and the Bush team is staggering back to their corner," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

While liberal groups have long opposed charitable choice, unexpected criticism of Bush's plan has come of late from the Religious Right. Broadcaster Pat Robertson and Southern Baptist Convention leader Richard Land have both been quoted as being skeptical of parts of the proposal.

One conservative lawmaker still backing the president's plan, however, shot back at critics from the Religious Right.

House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts, R-Okla., announced March 14 he is set to introduce legislation that will contain charitable choice. "We ought to encourage these new models and offer faith-based groups the same access to federal grants as other organizations," Watts said in a press release.

At a press conference, Watts unleashed on religious leaders whom he said are "throwing rocks" at the plan, comparing their opposition to churches that abdicated their responsibilities during past civil rights struggles.

Watts said a lot of problems that the country has experienced over the last 40 years could have been circumvented "had the faith community not abdicated their responsibility, and if they would have been involved the way their faith dictated that they should have been involved, i.e. racial issues."

Watts, who is African American, said most people in the faith community "were silent in the '50s and '60s."

"People had water hoses turned loose on them and police dogs turned loose on them because they wanted to sit at a lunch counter and eat a hamburger and drink a cup of coffee," Watts continued. "With the exception of some in the Catholic community ... very few in the faith community were active."

"I think the faith community needs to learn from the '50s and '60s ... and say that, 'in spite of the fact that we abdicated our biblical responsibilities to help feed the hungry, clothe the naked and house the homeless -- although we've abdicated that in many respects -- we've allowed the government to do that,'" he said.

"Don't just be against something, tell us what you're for," Watts admonished, later clarifying in an interview with Associated Baptist Press that he was referring to conservative religious leaders who "sat on the sidelines" during America's struggle for civil rights.

During the briefing, Watts discussed questions that have been raised about "charitable choice."

"I'm not looking to fund a church's faith or their religious activity," he said. "I don't know of any church that runs a faith-based operation through their church, out of their church," he added.

But Watts, who was an original sponsor of similar proposals in the past, seemed unaware of the fact that many houses of worship do run social-service ministries from within the church and without setting up separate entities.

Houses of worship have long been able to set up separate nonprofit groups that can receive tax money to perform social services but cannot proselytize or discriminate in hiring with the money. Charitable choice would allow a house of worship to receive the funds directly without such requirements against hiring only those who share its faith.

But when asked about churches who would want to take the funds and hire only people of like faith, Watts turned to his own hiring practices. "You know people who come into my office and ask to work for me," Watts said, "I don't ask them what their denomination is." He added, "I don't think you can go into these situations assuming that the person doing the hiring is going to be a racist. ... That dog just doesn't hunt with me."

Watts also said: "I would be highly concerned if we were funding an organization that says were going to try to make people Baptists. ... That is a blatant violation of separation of church and state."

He pointed out that the funding proposal is voluntary. "We're not saying to anyone you have to use federal dollars." He added, "If people have problems with it, they don't have to apply." But he acknowledged that a lot of questions about the plan are yet to be answered and some "firewalls" will be necessary.

While leaders of the Religious Right are just now criticizing the Bush initiative, religious leaders from the left say they have been raising concerns for a long time.

"I hate to say I told you so, but I told you so," said Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. "The BJC has been raising many of the concerns that some on the right are only recently discovering."

"Conservatives of all people ought to understand the harmful effect of government regulation on religion," Walker said. "We've said all along that government can't pick bad guys and good buys in matters of religion."

"Pat Robertson's concerns that these funds might go to less popular groups highlights the divisiveness brought about by picking and choosing who gets funding," he said.

The BJC recently joined with the Interfaith Alliance in creating an education guide for 20,000 houses of worship interested in partnering with government agencies. The "Keeping the Faith" guide highlights the perils of government funding of religion.

At a press event to release the guide March 13, leaders addressed the question about members of the Religious Right now jumping on the bandwagon of criticism following Bush's plan.

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, told reporters that organizations like his have long been raising concerns about problems related to the initiative but have been unheard. But "within a period of days," he added, when leaders of the Religious Right began to complain, there was quick reaction.

"That disturbs me," said Gaddy, an ordained Baptist minister. "It raises question in my mind about the influence of the Religious Right in and on the current administration."

-30-

Groups release guidelines on churches using tax funds

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Launching a major effort to educate churches about the perils of taking tax dollars for social-service ministries, the Baptist Joint Committee and the Interfaith Alliance released a guide March 13 that will be distributed to 20,000 houses of worship.

The free guide, titled "Keeping the Faith: The Promise of Cooperation, The Perils of Government Funding: A Guide for Houses of Worship," offers guidance "about whether and how religious social-service providers should accept public funds or otherwise cooperate with the government."

"The most successful social-service programs are those in which the money follows the vision, rather than the other way around," the guide advises.

The 15-page booklet highlights concerns with "charitable choice" initiatives, which have been proposed by President George W. Bush to fund faith-based services. While discussing "what's wrong" with such partnerships, the guide also details less-problematic ways of cooperating financially and non-financially with government.

Churches wanting to seek government funds should set up separate nonprofit entities from the church, the guide suggests. That separate entity would be subject to restrictions placed on tax dollars, while the church would not.

Listed in the guide as "Not OK" is a hypothetical ministry organized by members of a local church that receives tax dollars and "refuses to hire any staff members who will not sign a statement saying that they believe the Bible to be inerrant." An example listed as "OK, is if the same taxpayer-funded ministry "hires any person who is qualified for a job, without reference to religion or religious belief."

At a press conference at the National Press Club to release the guide, BJC Executive Director Brent Walker said it can be a "useful guidebook" for churches as they make important decisions about how and whether to partner with government.

"We all want to help the needy, and the government and religion may cooperate in this venture," Walker said. "However, there is a wrong way to do right and there are right ways to do right."

"Charitable choice," Walker said, is a wrong way. "How can a church raise its prophetic fist to criticize the state when its other hand is open for a government handout?" asked Walker in a prepared statement. "When government funding and direction is involved, more often than not, it is religion that loses in the end."

Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said his group would travel to selected states around the country and hold community forums to discuss the implications of Bush's initiative "and to raise concerns about the priorities and resources being allocated for assistance to those in need."

Gaddy said the guide is designed to serve as an educational resource for houses of worship and to highlight the implications of accepting tax dollars.

"We see inherent dangers in the government picking and choosing which religious endeavors are worthy of taxpayer support," Gaddy said.

Also speaking at the event was Justus Reeves of the Progressive National Baptist Convention, who said that the African-American church "has been a bedrock of social services within our community and we will continue to do so."

"We have done this without government involvement or interference and we believe in the principle of separation of church and state," Reeves said.

Reeves said the PNBC will use the document "and circulate it among our churches across the country to ensure that they understand all of the rules that are at work before they agree to any project which will undermine the prophetic voice of the church."

-30-

Denominational worker chooses church over job

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- A recent vote by Wilshire Baptist Church in Dallas to drop out of the Southern Baptist Convention left Jim Morrison with a choice -- either move his membership to an SBC-affiliated church or lose his job as an upper-level manager at the denomination's Annuity Board.

Morrison, managing director of retirement services and an Annuity Board employee for more than a decade, opted to stay with the church.

"Leaders on the [Annuity Board] management team and employees involved with marketing are required to be members of churches that are supportive of the Southern Baptist Convention," Morrison acknowledged in a statement he prepared to explain his decision to the church. He and his wife, Jerolyn, chose to remain with Wilshire when the church voted to leave the SBC Dec. 6.

"There was sadness in leaving the Annuity Board, but only praise for the way the employees and management team go about the opportunity to serve participants," he said. "They are good stewards of their responsibilities for their customers and are fiduciaries of the highest order."

And although Morrison enjoyed more than 10 years with the board, the couple acted on the knowledge that "personal identity and integrity are of prime importance to living a meaningful life," he said. "Opportunities for employment, service and the flow of life come as a result."

Morrison said three factors -- God's word, God's grace and God's future -- shaped their decision.

"We know from experience that to be fully alive we must live as free people who are responsive to God's word," he explained. "In a pluralistic world that has drifted toward relativism, we need a standard beyond ourselves.

"The standard for Jerolyn and me is the word of God -- the living Christ, the Bible and faithful believers. As a standard, the word of God allows tension to exist between the written word and the experienced word, the theology of the group and that of the individual, and openness to all people, none of whom are perfect.

"Wilshire Baptist Church is a place where we experience this type of personal freedom in Christ. This is not to imply that the Spirit of God is with one group rather than another group. The Spirit of God is the one in whom we all move and breathe and have our very existence."

The Morrises determined they must "remain free people under Christ's leadership if we are to be open to the flow of God's life through us and be true to ourselves," he said. "Scripture repeatedly affirms that if we know the truth and follow it, we are already set free."

Focusing on God's graciousness, "God's guidance began to mount" regarding their decision, he said. "The guidance came in various forms -- through conversations with friends, the Bible, reading material, reflections from the past and prayer."

Ultimately, "we were reminded it is better to be free people and responsive to God's future without details than it is to be bound by certainty," he noted. "We have often confused our careers with personal identity and our lives with income, only to miss God's daily presence."

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