



March 30, 2001

(01-26)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- House lawmakers introduce faith-based package**
- Laity key to church planting, conference speakers claim**
- Southern Baptist Historical Society changes name for broader appeal**
- Baptist named deputy chief for Air Force chaplains**
- U.S. religious freedom commission urges stronger action in Sudan**

**House lawmakers introduce
faith-based package**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Pressing forward despite criticism of President George W. Bush's faith-based initiative, a bipartisan group of House lawmakers has unveiled the sweeping "Community Solutions Act." The law would expand funding of religiously oriented social services and allow non-itemizers to deduct charitable giving from their taxable income.

The effort in the House of Representatives comes just days after news that the more controversial "charitable choice" portion of the Bush initiative, which would fund religious ministries with tax dollars, would be stalled in the Senate.

Longtime critics of charitable-choice programs have claimed they violate the separation of church and state. They have been joined recently by voices from the Religious Right raising concerns about unpopular or minority faiths benefiting from tax dollars and the prospect of government regulations accompanying federal funding.

Sen. Rick Santorum, R-Pa., said recently that Senate backers of the Bush initiative would proceed with the tax-incentive portions of the bill, but the charitable-choice provision could be delayed for as long as a year.

Nevertheless, House Republican Conference Chairman J.C. Watts, R-Okla., joined by House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., and Rep. Tony Hall, D-Ohio, announced March 21 they plan to move forward with legislation that includes the charitable-choice initiative as well.

Hastert said the "best remedy" for drug addiction and other social ills is provided by faith-based organizations. Standing alongside religious and advocacy leaders from groups such as Call to Renewal, Hastert said faith-based programs are more effective than government programs because they "provide that little extra something that made the difference to help people change their lives."

Hall was the one Democratic sponsor of the bill at the event. In an interview with Associated Baptist Press, Hall urged churches to set up a separate nonprofit 501c3 group to take tax dollars but said the legislation would not require it.

"They're going to have to separate the money. They can't use this money for religious instruction, proselytizing," Hall said. "Anytime you get federal money, it's always looked at. They will be audited."

Critics of the plan, including the Baptist Joint Committee and Americans United for Separation of Church and State, have long said that the type of regulations Hall discussed would interfere with the religious nature of the social programs and excessively entangle church and state. Other critics, including Reps. Bobby Scott, D-Va., and Chet Edwards, D-Texas, say charitable choice will allow tax-funded employment discrimination based on religion.

Houses of worship are exempted in the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits discrimination in hiring. The intent of that waiver was so churches could limit hiring to people of their own faith. While the waiver remains in place in the new proposal, Hall acknowledged that lawsuits are likely once churches start accepting tax dollars and continue to discriminate in hiring.

Joining critics from the left of late are members of the Religious Right, including Richard Land, president of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, and Pat Robertson of the Christian Coalition.

But House supporters are pressing on despite an expected uphill battle in the Senate.

"Charity is a virtue that transcends party lines," said Watts. "Faith-based and community groups have been quietly feeding the hungry and clothing the poor for years. We ought to promote the good work they do and empower them with resources to reach out to those who need their help," Watts said.

The bill received one of the GOP leadership's esteemed top 10 bill numbers -- H.R. 7 -- to indicate its high priority. Among other provisions, it would provide charitable-giving incentives to enable all Americans to deduct charitable giving on their tax returns. It would also allow for tax-free IRA charitable rollovers; establish liability protection for corporate donors to charities; and expand the charitable deduction to include the donation of food products by non-corporate taxpayers.

-30-

Laity key to church planting, conference speakers claim

By Ken Camp

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Church planting is too big a job for just seminary-trained ministers, conference leaders told a group of Baptist church starters.

"Some of the best church planters in the world today are not ordained pastors," Charles Brock, a 20-year veteran church planter in the Philippines, said during a three-day event sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Specialized seminars about lay-led churches and equipping the laity as church starters were offered at the "Light Up Texas" church-starting conference, held March 22-24 in Waco.

Brock said every lay person should be trained and skilled to assume the role of a full-time minister within six months of accepting Christ -- with or without ordination or salary.

"I am speaking of the realized priesthood of every believer," he said.

Trained laity can assume leadership of new congregations, but that requires a return to a New Testament understanding of church, Brock said. Too often, he said, Christians allow buildings, budgets and salaries to become barriers to church planting.

Such unnecessary complexity "limits Kingdom expansion," he maintained.

Brock, who now is president of Church Growth International in Neosho, Mo., called on churches to "unleash" their lay members and equip them with usable tools for church planting.

"If we are going to have a significant church-planting movement, the strategy, methods and tools must be simple enough that an ordinary, Holy Spirit-filled believer can do it," he said.

"It's amazing what people can do if they don't know -- and we don't tell them -- that they can't," he added.

Training new leaders from within a newly started church is essential, Brock said. This can be encouraged through simple, inductive Bible studies guided by a professional church planter, handing off leadership responsibilities to lay participants as soon as possible.

"I believe in the rapid transfer of leadership," he said.

Otto Arango, pastor of Iglesia Bautista Getsemini in McAllen, Texas, outlined for conference participants the basic approach he has taken the last five years in equipping lay church starters through local, church-based training centers.

"The purpose is not to enlarge the brain but to facilitate the laymen immediately becoming involved in ministry," Arango said. "It's a way of helping to wake up those who have been called."

In the last five years, more than 3,000 laymen have attended the training centers, and they have started at least 235 new churches.

Any training for laity needs to be practical, contemporary, contextualized and relevant, not theoretical and abstract, he suggested.

Arango does not recommend formal examinations in such training. "The test is the student's ability to use the material in ministry," he said.

-30-

Southern Baptist Historical Society changes name for broader appeal

By Jack Brymer

PENSACOLA, Fla. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Historical Society has changed its name to Baptist History and Heritage Society. Leaders said the move would expand the organization's interests and constituency without minimizing its relationship with state conventions, colleges/universities, associations, and churches that cooperate with Southern Baptists.

Society members approved the change by a ballot vote of 58 to 16 during the organization's annual meeting March 22-24 at First Baptist Church, Pensacola, Fla. The program dealt with Baptists and World War II and included a banquet at the National Museum of Naval Aviation.

The name-change recommendation came from a study committee that pointed out how the Southern Baptist Convention has changed the names of agencies to appeal to a broader audience. For example, the Baptist Sunday School Board's name has been changed to LifeWay Christian Resources.

"We wish to widen our tent," the report read. "Our goal is to do Baptist history with integrity, with openness to cooperate with all who are interested in our heritage, and with an avoidance of the political characteristics that have influenced Baptist life during the last 20 years."

In February 1995, the SBC Executive Committee voted to dissolve its Historical Commission, thus severing official relationships with the Historical Society, then an auxiliary to the Historical Commission. The society has operated independently since 1995 and does not receive funds from the denomination.

Speaking in support of the name change, Wayne Flynt of Alabama said the action allows the society "to go back to where we were before 1845," the year the Southern Baptist Convention was organized. Before then, Flynt said, black and white Baptists met together, noting that while there are 9 million black Baptists nationwide, "there is not one in the room today."

Albert Wardin Jr. of Tennessee was the sole member of the study committee who voted against the recommendation. During the floor debate, Wardin said he had opposed what the SBC had done in doing away with the Historical Commission, and he also opposed the Historical Society moving away from the SBC. He said the name change might result in "unintended consequences."

Three of his concerns were that it moves the society away from Southern Baptists, that in the future someone may take the name and that the action was a repudiation of Southern Baptist leadership. "I do not want that," he said.

Slayden Yarbrough of Oklahoma said that at first he opposed the action as being reactionary but later became convinced that the society was a primary organization that could carry out the cause of Baptist history. "The timing is right now," he said, suggesting that it would not have been a few years ago. "We deserve to expand," he said. "This is not a reaction but a committed effort to those who need us."

Bill Summers of Tennessee said he opposed the name change and had been against most of the other name changes made to date, citing the Baptist Sunday School Board, now LifeWay Christian Resources. "It's (Southern Baptist Historical Society) been a good name since 1938, but no matter the name, I will be a part of it and support it."

Walter Shurden of Georgia spoke in support of the name change, calling it a tremendous opportunity and challenge for the society. "More is being done and there is a greater interest in Baptist history now than ever," he said. "We will have the opportunity to acknowledge leadership of all Baptist historical groups in this country."

Rosalie Beck of Texas also spoke in favor of the name change, suggesting that dropping the word Southern would not change the direction of the organization; rather it would help "to declare who we are more succinctly, and to embrace others who call themselves Baptists."

In addition to the name change, the members elected new officers, Dan Kent, president, of Texas; Glenn Jonas, vice president, of North Carolina; Carol Crawford Holcomb, secretary, of Texas; and Charles Dewese, executive director-treasurer, of Tennessee.

The society created a long-range planning committee to report at the next annual meeting. Members include: Mike Williams (chair) of Texas; Carolyn Blevins, Tennessee; Susan Broome, Georgia; Brad Creed, Texas; and Frances Hamilton, Alabama.

Persons elected to three-year terms on the society's Council of Advisors included: Brad Creed, Texas; Jerry Faught, Oklahoma; Marlene Rikard, Alabama; and Walter Shurden, Georgia.

The society's 2002 meeting will take place at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn., on June 20-22.

Baptist named deputy chief for Air Force chaplains

By Ken Camp

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- A third-generation Baptist minister has been named deputy chief of the United States Air Force Chaplain Service.

Charlie Baldwin, who has served the last 18 months at Randolph Air Force Base, reports to his new post in Washington D.C. on April 5. His three-year assignment as deputy chief over 600 chaplains and 450 enlisted chaplains' assistants is scheduled to begin May 1. Pending Senate approval, he will be promoted from colonel to brigadier general.

His new responsibilities will include advising the Air Force Chief of Staff on matters of religion, morale and the spiritual welfare of the troops. In particular, he will be responsible for ensuring that all Air Force personnel are guaranteed the free exercise of religion.

"When I preach, I sound like a Southern Baptist preacher, because that's what I am," he said. "I give an invitation at every chapel service in which I preach. But I also have a responsibility to ensure the rights of every member of the United States Air Force to practice his or her faith. The same constitutional guarantees that allow me the privilege of proclaiming a gospel message provide for the religious free exercise of every individual."

Baldwin understands the balancing act that comes with being an evangelical minister in a pluralistic setting. His father served 22 years as Air Force chaplain, and his grandparents served 30 years as Southern Baptist missionaries in China.

Baldwin is a 1969 graduate of the United States Air Force Academy.

"As a cadet, I was in a revival service at the Baptist church I attended then when I felt the call into Christian service," he said. "But I still owed the Air Force five years for my education."

He was licensed to the gospel ministry while a cadet at the academy, but he fulfilled his military obligation as a rescue-helicopter pilot in Vietnam.

After completing his term of service, he served five years as a civilian Baptist minister, completing his education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

He was commissioned in January 1979 as a chaplain and assigned to Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, Texas. His career as a chaplain has taken him to various posts around the United States, as well as to Italy and West Germany.

While serving as senior chaplain at Myrtle Beach Air Force Base in South Carolina he transferred to Saudi Arabia as part of Operation Desert Storm.

"That was undoubtedly the most meaningful experience I have had," he said. "I'll never forget baptizing in the desert, using emptied missile containers."

U.S. religious freedom commission urges stronger action in Sudan

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Amid reports of worsening religious-freedom abuses in the Sudan, a United States commission is urging the Bush administration to mount a comprehensive and sustained campaign to pressure the Muslim-dominated government to improve its record on human rights.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom issued a new report repeating an earlier assessment calling Sudan "the world's most violent abuser of the right to freedom of religion and belief." The report asks the administration to step up efforts to end the country's 18-year civil war, which has resulted in 2 million Sudanese deaths and displacement of 4 million.

The commission said last year that religion is a major factor in the ongoing civil war. The report said religious-freedom violations were intertwined with other abuses of human rights in Sudan.

While the Clinton administration implemented some sanctions recommended by the panel last year, the new report says actions by the U.S. "while mixed, have not been commensurate with the appalling violations of religious freedom and other human rights by that government."

While the Clinton administration worked successfully to prevent Sudan from taking a seat in the United Nations Security Council and earmarking aid to the Sudanese government's opposition, the report says Sudan for the most part remained "on the back burner of U.S. policy."

The Clinton administration's actions "fell well short of the comprehensive, sustained campaign that the commission believes is commensurate with the Sudanese government's abuses," the new report says, urging the new administration to mount such a campaign.

The commission says Sudan continues to suppress any political opposition and commits grave human-rights abuses. The government has intensified deliberate bombing of civilian and humanitarian targets, such as hospitals, schools, churches, markets and relief-organization compounds, the report continues.

"Religious groups must be registered by the government to operate legally, and approval can be difficult to obtain," the report states. Unregistered groups cannot build places of worship or meet in public and even registered groups face difficulties.

"The Sudanese government has continued its assault on the religious freedom of non-Muslims as well as some Muslims (particularly those associated with the political opposition)," the report states.

In September 2000, the U.S. State Department named Sudan as a "country of particular concern" for the second straight year pursuant to the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

Specific recommendations of the nine-member commission include appointing a prominent individual to bring about a just settlement of Sudan's civil war and to end religious-freedom abuses and other atrocities but not to appoint an ambassador at this time.

The panel urges increasing both humanitarian assistance to Sudan and support for the government's political opposition. The report also calls for strengthening economic sanctions, including the banning of foreign companies that invest in oil and gas fields in Sudan from raising capital or listing securities in U.S. markets.

-30-

END
