



# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Bush touts character education, faith-based after-school programs**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Saying America needs not only to teach its children to read and write but also to "be bold enough to teach them the difference between right and wrong," President George W. Bush led an April panel discussion to promote character education in the nation's schools.

Sitting beneath a portrait of Abraham Lincoln in the State Dining room of the White House, Bush said: "Parents have a tough battle in America today. Their children sometimes receive conflicting messages. And what public education ought to do is stand on the side of parents and be willing to reinforce the values that parents teach their children."

The president said the U.S. budget should reflect the nation's priorities. His proposed budget "triples the amount of character education money available for public education," he said.

Bush quoted Martin Luther King Jr., who said: "Intelligence is not enough. Intelligence plus character, that is the goal of true education."

The budget Bush submitted to Congress increases the amount of money available for abstinence-education programs. It also encourages after-school programs "to be run by faith-based and community-based programs that exist because they've heard the universal call to love a neighbor just like they'd like to be loved themselves."

During a lighter moment at the White House event, Bush sat next to Isaiah Greene, a middle-school student who experienced discipline problems that later improved after participating in the Young Gentlemen's Club. Greene said the club teaches boys how to "respect women and how to control our attitude."

Bush asked Greene, "You listen to your mom?" When the child said yes, Bush quipped, "I listen to mine."

Following the panel discussion, Bush shook hands with the dozen-or-so kids in the youth program. While posing for pictures, Bush asked the children, "Do you want to see my office?" They cheered, "Yes!" but when one asked if they could have soda pop, Bush shook his head no.

Bush has proposed an increase in federal aid to faith-based organizations that engage in providing social services by proposing to expand "charitable-choice" funding provisions. House lawmakers have introduced legislation to expand the effort, but critics of the plan say it violates church-state separation.

Meanwhile, a broad coalition of religious, education and civil-liberties groups urged House lawmakers to reject the "Community Solutions Act," sponsored by Reps. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., and Tony Hall, D-Ohio.

In an April 11 letter, the coalition urged rejection of the charitable-choice provisions of the Watts-Hall measure.

"'Charitable choice' is an unconstitutional and dangerous proposal that will harm religion, authorize government-funded discrimination, undermine the accountability of taxpayer dollars, foster litigation against state and local governments and violate the personal rights of Americans seeking help," the letter states.

Among the groups signing the letter were Americans United for Separation of Church and State, American Association of School Administrators, American Jewish Committee, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, Catholics for a Free Choice, National Education Association, People for the American Way and The Interfaith Alliance.

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## **Houston Baptist professor to head Duke's Baptist House**

DURHAM, N.C. (ABP) -- Duke University Divinity School has named Texas professor Curtis Freeman as new director of its Baptist House of Studies.

Freeman, 45, is professor of Christianity and philosophy at Houston Baptist University, where he has taught since 1987. He replaces Duke's first Baptist House director, Furman Hewitt, who retires in July after nine years.

The Baptist House is a key component in Methodist-affiliated Duke's effort to recruit Baptist students. Baptists comprise more than 100 of the approximately 475 students from 40 denominations currently enrolled in the divinity school.

"Curtis Freeman brings a view of Baptist life that spans multiple traditions," said Divinity School Dean Gregory Jones. "He will bring dynamic leadership and continue our strong trend of relationships with Baptist churches and the nurture of Baptist students. We also expect that he will make a strong contribution in research and teaching."

In addition to his duties as program director at Duke, Freeman also will be a research professor of theology and Baptist studies in the divinity school.

Duke's Baptist House provides counseling and assists with field education and employment placements for graduate students in the divinity school, the Department of Religion and the chaplain intern program at Duke University Medical Center.

"It is my hope that the Baptist studies program will become a major axis for Baptist intellectual life in the 21st century as well as a crucial location for the education and training of men and women for Christian ministry," Freeman said.

Freeman won Houston Baptists' Opal Goolsby Presidential Award for Teaching Excellence in 1993-94. He is co-author of *Baptist Roots: A Reader in Theology of a Christian People*, published in 1999 by Judson Press.

He holds a bachelor's degree and Ph.D. in religion from Baylor University and a master's of divinity from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He also has served for a decade as interim pastor of an inner-city church in Houston.

"Curtis Freeman has a voice, a presence, a reputation and a vision that will speak to our desire to become the place where outstanding Baptist students from across America receive their theological training and church ministry preparation," said Bob Bailey, a Baptist House board of directors member from Birmingham, Ala., who chaired the search committee.

Duke Divinity School is one of seven professional schools on the Duke campus in Durham, N.C.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Survey finds qualified support for church-state partnerships**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Most Americans support the notion of government contracting with religious groups to provide social services, according to a new survey.

Many, however, apparently haven't thought through the implications of such arrangements. The same poll indicates greater concern about specifics of implementing plans like President Bush's proposed faith-based initiative.

The poll released jointly April 10 by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life and the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press found that three Americans in four (75 percent) favor government funding of faith-based organizations, while 21 percent oppose it in principle.

Asked a more specific question, however, more than 40 percent said they oppose funding of Muslim mosques, Buddhist temples or Mormon churches. And 78 percent said religious groups shouldn't be permitted to hire only people of the same faith while taking tax dollars.

President George W. Bush has recently touted a faith-based initiative that would expand the existing "charitable-choice" provisions to allow religious groups to apply for federal funds for a plethora of social programs.

The survey found the biggest hurdle facing taxpayer funding of faith-based groups is the "widespread resistance to any sort of discriminatory hiring practices on the part of religious organizations that receive government funds."

It also found strong concerns about issues related to the separation of church and state.

Of 2,041 adults surveyed in March, 68 percent worried that tax funds for faith groups "might lead to too much government involvement with religious organizations." About 60 percent said groups that encourage religious conversion should be prohibited from receiving taxpayer funds. And 60 percent said they have concerns about religious groups proselytizing recipients of social services.

The issue of charitable choice divides Americans along both party and racial lines. "On the Republican side, white evangelicals are more enthusiastic than other conservatives and moderate Republicans," a summary of the survey says. "Among Democrats, a bare majority of white liberals favor the idea, while black Democrats embrace it as strongly as Republican evangelicals."

Despite holding many reservations, the survey says Americans "find arguments in favor of faith-based funding to be compelling, and a strong majority acknowledges the contribution churches, synagogues and other religious groups make to society."

Melissa Rogers, executive director of the Pew Forum, said the survey's mixed response reflects "a theoretical understanding put to a practical test."

"There are several different matters that can move public opinion significantly on this issue," noted Rogers, former general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

Both supporters and critics of "charitable choice" found data to back their positions.

White House officials and congressional supporters of the Bush faith-based initiative said the survey showed broad public support for the plan.

"Americans share the president's commitment to reaching out to faith-based groups and charities because they have a proven record of changing and saving lives," White House spokesman Scott McClellan told reporters.

But Holly Hollman, newly appointed general counsel to the Baptist Joint Committee, said the survey shows that while the idea of government support for religion has "superficial appeal," parts of Bush's charitable-choice plan are "disturbing to most people."

Another opponent, Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for the Separation of Church and State, observed, "Americans don't mind religious social services getting some government aid, as long as there are strict safeguards in place."

"People are worried that religious groups they don't like or don't understand will get their tax dollars," Lynn said.

On a side note, an alliance of more than 25 conservative religious and other organizations announced plans to form a "Coalition for Compassion" to support the Bush initiative. Among the groups are the National Association of Evangelicals, the Family Research Council and the Eagle Forum.

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: The full survey can be read at the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life at <http://pewforum.org/events/0410/report/execsum.php3>

## **President proclaims Jewish heritage week**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President George W. Bush has proclaimed April 22-29 Jewish Heritage Week, urging all Americans to join to observe the week "with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities."

The proclamation is by tradition issued annually by U.S. presidents.

"The Jewish community has played a vital role in our nation's history, tracing back to colonial times," Bush said in the proclamation issued April 9.

Bush said the many Jewish persons who fled persecution, pogroms and the Holocaust to seek religious freedom and a new life in the United States remind the nation "that we must remain committed to religious liberty and tolerance for all."

The Jewish community's "rich heritage and culture continues to enrich our society's national fabric," Bush continued. "In many communities large and small, Jewish families have shared their resources, time, and talent to help others. Their contributions to our national life and character help make America a better place."

The president urged "all Americans to join in observing this week with appropriate programs, ceremonies, and activities.

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## **Attorney general criticizes violent video games**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- U.S. Attorney General John Ashcroft, in a series of recent speeches, has stepped up criticism of violent video games and media that he says glorify drugs, guns and "condition" children to act violently.

In a speech to newspaper editors, for example, Ashcroft said the media should take responsibility for contributing to what he called a "culture of violence."

Ashcroft stopped short of saying he supports the limiting of free-speech rights in the First Amendment.

"If I were one to believe that the only solutions were governmental, I might be willing to trade First Amendment rights to improve the culture," Ashcroft said. "Frankly, I don't think trading First Amendment rights is a way to improve culture."

However, Ashcroft asked, "What does it do to children, who see thousands of acts of violence on television, who are conditioned in video games to do things that are abhorrent to the human spirit?"

Ashcroft noted that culprits of past student shootings in Kentucky and Colorado had previously played violent video games.

In the Paducah, Ky., shooting, Ashcroft said the attacker had never fired a real handgun before. "Yet he managed to fire eight shots, hitting eight different students, all in the upper torso or the head, using the pistol," Ashcroft said. "And the FBI folks at the Department of Justice tell me that the average, experienced law-enforcement officer at the range would have hit one bullet in five."

Ashcroft concluded that the young student "learned how to aim from extensive playing of video games."

"We live in a culture of violence, and it's going to take more than government to address it," Ashcroft challenged. "Everyone has to have a role."

He also criticized media coverage of school shootings and other incidents. "I've noticed recently that each time a school shooting occurs there's enormous media coverage," he said. "I have to wonder how much news coverage plays into the copycat incidents."

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## **Religious-persecution panel urges sanctions against Vietnam**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The United States should oppose international loans to Vietnam because its government violates religious freedom, says a federal commission.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom urged Secretary of State Colin Powell and Treasury Secretary Paul O'Neill to withhold U.S. support for International Monetary Fund and World Bank loans until Vietnam agrees to make substantial improvements in the protection of religious freedom.

"Despite the increase in religious practice among the Vietnamese people in the last 10 years, the Vietnamese government suppresses organized religious activities forcefully and monitors and controls religious communities," wrote Commission Chairman Elliott Abrams.

Abrams said: "The government prohibits religious activity by those not affiliated with one of the six officially recognized religious organizations. Individuals have been detained, fined, imprisoned, and kept under close surveillance by security forces for engaging in 'illegal' religious activities.

"In addition, the government uses the recognition process to monitor and control officially sanctioned religious groups -- restricting the procurement and distribution of religious literature, controlling religious training, and interfering with the selection of religious leaders."

The nine-member commission also urged Powell, to initiate or support a resolution to censure Vietnam at the annual meeting of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights in Geneva.

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