



# Associated Baptist Press

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## High court refuses hearings in two church-state cases

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON -- The U.S. Supreme Court turned away appeals in two church-state cases June 18.

The high court left intact a ruling that allowed students to participate in group prayer at school functions and a decision in favor of a teacher who refused to let a first-grade student read a Bible story to fellow classmates as part of the class activity.

In 1996, a high school vice principal Michael Chandler and his son Jesse -- a student at the school -- objected to school-sanctioned Christian prayers, Bible distribution, religiously based student assemblies and other religious activities in Alabama's DeKalb County public schools. Chandler challenged a 1993 Alabama law that said students may lead prayers at school activities, including sporting events, student assemblies and graduations.

The 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled in 1999 that teachers and other school officials may not prescribe prayers, but they also wrote broad language allowing a wide array of religious speech by students. At the time, church-state separation advocates called the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit ruling confusing and a "mixed bag."

Last year, the Supreme Court told the lower court to review the policy in light of a separate 2000 high court decision against a Texas public school's district's policy of allowing students to lead stadium crowds in prayer over the intercom. In *Santa Fe Independent School District v. Doe*, justices ruled 6-3 that the prayer policy amounted to school-sponsored prayer and violated the U.S. Constitution.

But the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit stood by their original ruling and its language.

Attorneys for Chandler argued to the high court that the 11<sup>th</sup> Circuit ignored the Supreme Court's *Sante Fe* decision. But attorneys for the state of Alabama disagreed and the high court refused to take the case.

Joe Conn, a spokesman from Americans United for Separation of Church and State, told Associated Baptist Press that the high court's refusal to take the case is "bound to sow confusion." He said, "The Religious Right groups, like Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice, will take this as a green light to expand as much as possible student-led religious activities in the public schools."

But, Conn added, "They shouldn't overextend that too far because there are still strict curbs in place prohibiting any type of school sponsorship or encouragement of religious activities by students."

In a separate case on the same day, the high court left intact a ruling in favor of a public school teacher's refusal to let Zachary Hood -- then a first grader in a Medford, N.J., public elementary school -- read a Bible story to fellow classmates.

First grade teacher Grace Oliva rewarded reading achievement by allowing students to read a favorite story to classmates. Students were told they must select stories that were short and simple enough for first-graders to understand, and the teacher screened their selections.

Zachary chose a story based on the Old Testament account of brothers Jacob and Esau. Although it appeared in "The Beginner's Bible," the text of the story did not contain overtly religious terms or references to God or the Bible.

Oliva thought it was inappropriate for youngsters to hear the story and had Zachary read it to her in private instead.

Zachary's mother complained, but the principal backed the teacher and said reading the story aloud would be "the equivalent of praying." Hood's mother sued, seeking a school policy allowing religious expression in class work and money as punishment for the charged discrimination.

The 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals rejected the mother's complaints and ruled that the teacher was within her rights to restrict access to what the school calls a "captive audience" of 6- and 7-year-olds.

Lawyers with the Becket Fund for Religious Liberty argued to the Supreme Court that the school discriminated against Zachary's views in violation of the First Amendment.

But lawyers for the school district agreed with lower court rulings and accused Zachary's lawyers of misinterpreting or overemphasizing the case's constitutional relevance in hopes of enticing the Supreme Court to get involved.

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## **Mercer University creates Center for Baptist Studies**

By John Hall

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Mercer University will launch a Center for Baptist Studies July 1 to encourage the exploration of Baptist history, distinctives and issues.

Walter Shurden, a Baptist historian and chair of the Christianity department at Mercer, will direct the program.

Shurden said he hopes the center will host conferences on Baptist life, give scholarships to Baptist scholars and provide Baptist history curriculum to local churches. He said the first event for the center will be a conference on Baptists and Calvinism in October. He also hopes to have a conference of about 10 to 15 scholars later in the year to discuss an aspect of Baptist life.

"In all of this, I'm hoping to get people to see that we as Baptists are not a denomination unto ourselves but that we belong to and are deeply indebted to the universal Christian tradition," Shurden said. "We come out of that tradition and have benefited from that tradition. We also enrich that tradition. Baptists need to rediscover their connection with the Christian church."

The Mercer center is the latest manifestation of a heightened interest in Baptist studies over the past 10 years. Other Baptist studies programs have been started at Duke University Divinity School in Durham, N.C., Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta, and Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University in Fort Worth, Texas -- all non-Baptist institutions.

Three historically Baptist schools also have beefed up the scholarly study of Baptists -- Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn., the University of Richmond (Va.), and Baylor University in Waco, Texas.

Richard Wilson, dean of Chapel at Mercer, was named chair of the Christianity department to replace Shurden, who will relinquish the position to lead the Center for Baptist Studies but continue to teach in the department.

Wilson served as general editor of *The Mercer Commentary on the Bible* and as an assistant editor of *The Mercer Dictionary of the Bible*. He has been the executive secretary-treasurer of the National Association of Baptist Professors of Religion since 1993. He is also a member of the Theological Education Work Group and of the Ethics Commission of the Baptist World Alliance.

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## **ABP elects directors for new foundation board**

By Christopher Hedglin

JACKSONVILLE, FLA. (ABP) -- Seven members have been elected to serve on the inaugural board of directors for the new Associated Baptist Press Foundation, Inc. The foundation approved last fall by ABP's corporate board of directors.

The new board includes George Borders of Melrose, Fla., retired president of Florida Baptist Financial Services and the Florida Baptist Foundation in Jacksonville. Other members include Randall Fields, a financial consultant with Merrill Lynch Co. in San Antonio, Texas; Roger Hall, chief financial officer for the Baptist General Convention of Texas in Dallas; Joe Turner, chief executive officer of First Sun Management food franchise company in Clemson, S.C.; and Boyce Wilson, retired certified public accountant from Winston-Salem, N.C. Wilson also currently serves as the acting chief financial officer for the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

Two foundation board members were chosen to represent ABP's corporate board of directors. Jack Faulkner, retired president of Baker Distributing in Jacksonville, and Ralph Walls, retired owner/president of Plaza Ford in Churchville, Md., will serve one-year terms.

The foundation was incorporated earlier this year as a subsidiary of ABP, a 10-year-old independent news service based in Jacksonville. The foundation board will receive gifts for ABP and will oversee the organization's investments. In addition, the foundation board will help with fundraising, particularly in the area of planned giving.

"The formation of our own foundation is a positive demonstration of ABP's maturity as an organization," said Philip Poole. "The foundation board members bring years of professional experience that will help us succeed immediately in building an endowment to secure ABP's financial future."

Poole was appointed by the board as acting executive director of the foundation. He also is ABP's executive director and chief operating officer.

The foundation board's next meeting is Sept. 13 in Jacksonville.

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