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House approves faith initiative, but battle awaits in Senate

By Christopher Hedglin

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Debate about government funding of religion and the separation of church and state took center stage on the floor of the House of Representatives July 19 as President George W. Bush's "faith-based" initiative passed by a margin of 233-198.

Among other things, the bill would expand "charitable choice," allowing more tax dollars to fund social services run by pervasively religious organizations, such as churches.

Supporters say such groups are often more effective than secular ones and should not be discriminated against in qualifying for federal funding. Critics say the plan violates church-state separation and will burden religious groups with government regulations that come with tax dollars.

The House approved the bill, titled "The Community Solution Act," after delaying the vote a day to allow Bush time to lobby moderate GOP lawmakers for support.

Despite H.R. 7's passage in the House, the bill faces an uphill battle in the Senate, where it faces stiffer opposition.

Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D., has signaled that the measure may not be considered before next year and expressed doubts that it would pass in its present form. "I can't imagine that we could pass any bill that would tolerate slipping back to a level of tolerance that would be unacceptable in today's society," Daschle said, according to news reports.

In a press conference following the vote, however, the bill's author, Rep. J.C. Watts, R-Okla., said he is confident that the faith-based initiative "can overcome any hurdles in the Senate."

A leading critic of charitable choice commented at another press conference. "It's a sad day because this absolutely terrible bill passed the House," said Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y. "But it's a good day, because I think that the very large vote that we got against this is a step toward defeating it, and a signal to our friends in the Senate to stiffen their spines a little on this issue."

Nadler said the bill would allow groups receiving tax dollars to discriminate in hiring, as long as it is for religious reasons.

"If a church group believes that women belong in the kitchen and should not work outside, under this bill they could use federal funds in a federal program and say, 'We're not hiring any women,'" he said.

Many church-based charities, because of an exemption in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, are permitted

to hire only workers from their own faith. Opponents of charitable choice, however, say it is wrong for federal money to be used to discriminate based on religion.

"No American citizen, not one, should have to pass someone else's religious test to qualify for a federally funded job," said Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, during the House debate. In his remarks, Edwards noted that he was siding with "over 1,000 religious leaders across America" in his decision to oppose the bill.

Supporters, however, were quick to defend the hiring practices of churches even if they take tax dollars.

"One of the most important charitable-choice principles is the guarantee of institutional autonomy that allows faith-based organizations to select staff on a religious basis," said Rep. James Sensenbrenner, R-Wis.

A much-hailed provision in an early draft of the bill allowing taxpayers who don't itemize to deduct donations to charitable organizations and churches all but disappeared in the final version. The House Ways and Means Committee earlier watered down that provision, allowing single itemizers to claim up to \$25 in charitable gifts, saving the taxpayer about \$4.

After the vote, House Democratic Leader Richard Gephardt said the tax incentive "is not paid for and is so small it will make almost no difference in charitable giving."

Gay-rights groups opposed the bill because they fear it would weaken state laws prohibiting discrimination based on sexual orientation.

Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., thanked his colleagues who opposed the bill "both as a members of Congress and as a gay man."

Religious groups have been split over the initiative.

The Traditional Values Coalition supports the plan and issued a press statement saying that "homosexual activists and their allies in Congress are attempting to destroy President Bush's faith-based initiative."

"I am outraged that homosexuals are willing to destroy an effort to help low-income families," said Andrea Lafferty, executive director of the Traditional Values Coalition.

But other religious leaders joined the opposition to the Bush initiative, citing concerns about the separation of church and state.

"There are people everywhere who oppose ... the principle of charitable choice not despite their religious beliefs but precisely because of them," said Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. He said such people support religious liberty and the separation of church and state out of a "high regard" for religion.

Welton Gaddy of the Interfaith Alliance issued a statement saying the bill "takes us back to pre-civil rights and pre-First Amendment days."

"President Bush's faith-based initiatives and proposed expansion of charitable-choice legislation will compromise the voice of faith and create a social-service system prone to discrimination, coercion and proselytization -- all in the name of religion," said Gaddy, a Baptist minister.

Senators turn to Scripture in stem-cell debate

By Cliff Vaughn

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Senators and scientists debated stem-cell research July 18 with one eye on science and another on Scripture.

Debate over whether to allow federal funding of medical research involving embryonic stem cells, which are harvested from eggs that are fertilized but not implanted in a mother's womb by fertility clinics, is prompting rare introspection from lawmakers.

While doctors say the research holds great promise for treatment of debilitating illnesses like heart disease, diabetes and Alzheimer's, pro-lifers say human life, even in embryonic form, is sacred and should not be used for research.

Even President Bush, who is against abortion, hasn't said where he will come down on the ethical dilemma.

"At many points in our history, religion and science have intersected," Sen. Tom Harkin, D-Iowa, chairman of a Senate Appropriations Subcommittee, said during debate. "And at every point, we have paused to measure our morality and the ancient lessons of religion against our science and the new frontiers we explore," said Harkin, a Catholic.

Explicit appeals to "Christianity" were all but absent from C-SPAN's broadcast of the hearing, but that tradition's Scriptures were quoted and referenced repeatedly.

First to offer testimony were four senators.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, a Mormon, said he supported federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research, with certain guidelines in place.

"Over many months I devoted hours of study to this important issue, reflecting on my spiritual teachings, the law and science, and the ethical issues presented by embryonic stem-cell research," he said.

Sen. Bill Frist, R-Tenn., a Presbyterian, said, "What we ultimately decide is going to be colored on our own spiritual beliefs, on our own moral beliefs, on what experience we have had."

While Frist stated his support of federal funding of embryonic stem-cell research, he emphasized the need for a comprehensive, ethical framework that respects "the moral significance of the human embryo."

"And that's based on spiritual values, moral values, religious values and the medical view I have," Frist said.

Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., said the debate centered on the basic question, "Is it a life? Or is it a mere piece of property to be disposed of as its master chooses?"

By choosing the word "master," Brownback alluded to language of Jesus' parables in the New Testament. A Methodist, Brownback continued in that vein after citing some research indicating that the stem cells grow so rapidly that tumors may result. "In many respects," he said, "they may be placing the 'new wine in old skins' parable ... in front of us."

Sen. Gordon Smith, R-Utah, said the magnitude of the debate led him to consult "sources of truth" for guidance.

Smith, a Mormon, then read Genesis 2:7: "And the Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground, and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and man became a living soul."

Smith referred to the passage as an "allegory of creation" that illustrated the two-step process of life: first flesh, then spirit.

He characterized cells as "dust of the earth," which are essential to life but, standing alone, will never constitute human life because they lack the breath of life.

"As an ancient apostle said, 'The body without the spirit is dead,'" quoted Smith from James 2:26.

He said he believes life begins in a womb, not a laboratory.

Another panelist later took issue with Smith's theology.

Richard Doerflinger, associate director of policy development for the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops, called Smith's claim of a two-step process of life biologically "absurd."

He characterized Smith's statement as "amateur theology," according to the Los Angeles Times.

The last panelist to offer expert testimony was Michael West, president and CEO of Advanced Cell Technology in Massachusetts. West said he too was pro-life, but that embryonic stem-cell research was consistent with a pro-life position.

West said the phrase "human life" is sometimes misused, testifying that embryos are not yet individualized human life since they possess the potential to combine or split. "To ascribe to unindividualized cells the status of a person is a logical inconsistency."

Following suit, West also cited the Bible.

First, he quoted the apostle Paul: "When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things" (I Cor 13:11).

West concluded that since the United States is a world leader in biotechnology, it is time to pursue a mature and reasoned debate on the issue.

West also referenced the parable of talents in Matthew 25, saying the medical community had been given "two talents of gold." One is a cell that "can form any cell tissue in the body," and the other is the ability "to return a cell back in time with a tiny time machine of nuclear transfer to make these cells identical to a patient."

He concluded by urging the U.S. "to shrug off accusations that we're building a modern Tower of Babel in reaching for the heavens."

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-- Cliff Vaughn is associate director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. This story appeared earlier in the BCE's electronic newsletter, bcE*byte.

Religious freedom panel begins work despite Bush delay in appointments

By Christopher Hedglin

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Despite missing three of its voting members, a new U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom issued its first formal action this week, asking Secretary of State Colin Powell to raise issues of religious freedom on his upcoming trip to Asia.

Six of the commission's members sent Powell a letter on July 23, urging him to "raise prominently the protection of religious freedom in China, Vietnam, and the Democratic People's Republic of Korea" when he travels there later in the month.

The commission, which serves two-year terms, was created in 1998 under the International Religious Freedom Act to advise both the President and Congress on matters of religious freedom abroad.

The previous commissioners' terms ended May 14, and only six of the nine members on the new commission have been appointed. President George W. Bush has yet to make his three appointments to the panel, which means for now there is a majority of Democratic appointments instead of a majority Republican-led panel that the law calls for. Since six members make a quorum for the panel, however, they have begun work and the letter to Powell is their first action.

Associated Baptist Press has previously reported that Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission President Richard Land is likely to be among those appointed to the government-funded commission by Bush. Land, who has been the president of the ERLC since 1998, gained national attention for engineering the SBC's boycott of Disney.

The six current members include Leila Nadya Sadat of the Washington University School of Law and Felice Gaer of the American Jewish Committee's Jacob Blaustein Institute for the Advancement of Human Rights. Both were appointed by House Minority Leader Richard Gephardt, D-Mo.

Firuz Kazemzadeh, senior advisor to the National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States and Charles Stith, former United States ambassador to Tanzania, were selected by Senate Majority leader Tom Daschle, D-S.D. Senate Republican Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., chose Michael Young, dean of the George Washington University Law School, for the commission. Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., appointed Nina Shea, director of the Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom.

In the letter to Powell, the commission mentioned abuses in China including the fact that "leaders and members of unregistered Protestant and Roman Catholic churches have been arrested, Tibetan Buddhist monasteries closed and private religious practices monitored, and Uighur Muslims in Xinjiang have been executed on specious charges without even a semblance of due process or fair trial."

Other abuses included the destroying of religious buildings and the government's continued "control over the training and selection of clergy and leaders of the official Protestant and Catholic churches."

Grievances with the Vietnamese government included their "repressive policy toward all religions and their followers in Vietnam," specifically pointing out Hoa Hao Buddhists and Christians that are of ethnic minorities.

The Commission also recommended that Powell work with officials from Japan and South Korea to help send a message to North Korea regarding "the importance that the U.S. assigns to the protection of human rights, including religious freedom, and to the eradication of the particularly severe violations thereof."

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-- Kenny Byrd contributed to this story.

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