



# Associated Baptist Press

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### **Baptist Joint Committee urges cautious response to terrorism**

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Terrorist attacks on the United States, presumably the work of religious fanatics, illustrate a worst-case scenario of the perils of intertwining church and state, says a Baptist coalition for religious liberty.

Sept. 11 acts killing thousands in New York, Washington and Pennsylvania were prime examples of what can go wrong when religious zeal is wedded with political and military clout, said Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

While applauding renewed patriotism in the United States since the attacks, including public references to America's religious heritage, BJC directors cautioned against discussing the nation's military response as a holy cause.

"We urge our national leaders and all Americans to use language that reflects the appropriate role of government, bearing in mind that banishing evil completely from the earth falls to the ultimate reign of God," BJC directors said in a resolution adopted Oct. 2.

The BJC, a 65-year-old coalition of Baptists in the U.S., supports the free exercise of religion but opposes the government establishing religious faith, two tenets spelled out in the First Amendment of the Constitution.

Walker, an attorney and Baptist minister who has led the Washington-based BJC two years, said there has been a "dramatic rise ... in expressions of civil religion" since events of Sept. 11.

"Much of the civil religion we are seeing is good," Walker said. "I really appreciated the members of Congress singing 'God Bless America.' It brought a really good, warm feeling in my heart."

Other public pronouncements, however, such as President Bush's terming the war against terrorism a "crusade" and pledging to "rid the world of evil," Walker said, are "bad theology."

They describe "goals that are accomplished by the kingdom of God rather than the reign of Caesar," Walker said.

The Bush administration has already responded to some of those concerns, apologizing for using the word "crusade" and renaming the nation's military response from operation "infinite justice" to "enduring freedom."

The BJC resolution offers sympathy and prayer for victims of the Sept. 11 attacks and support for U.S. leaders in their efforts to seek justice and protect American citizens. Citing Jesus' admonition to pray for

enemies, the resolution also encourages prayer "for those who perpetrated or aided in the aggression and those who wish our country ill."

It asks the nation, in its diplomatic and military response, to "be careful not to compound the tragedy by sowing seeds of hate, casting blame where it does not belong and seeking vengeance instead of justice."

Prior to the regular BJC meeting, newspaper columnist E.J. Dionne described to committee members a "most peculiar way" that religious faith has come into play in the events of Sept. 11 and their aftermath.

While decrying a "radical Islamic faith" that may have led to terrorism, Americans "flocked to houses of worship" for solace, he observed.

In analyzing a religious response to the events, Dionne, a Roman Catholic said, "My own hope is we will view faith as much a challenge as a comfort."

Walker said the BJC has received a lot of questions since the attacks about the appropriate uses of the American flag in worship services. He also described flinching at Jesse Jackson leading a prayer while speaking at an assembly at a public high school that students were required to attend. Voiced prayer is appropriate in some settings, Walker said, but "not in a mandatory assembly in a public school."

In other business at a regular board meeting held Oct. 1-2 in Washington, the BJC approved a \$1,028,000 budget for next year. Walker blamed a poor economy, reduced giving in member denominations and increased competition for charitable giving as factors in presenting what he described as a "status quo" budget.

Jeff Huett, associate director of communications, said the BJC is seeking to attract younger supporters via the Internet and with free and student memberships to the Religious Liberty Council, an association of individuals that partners with the BJC.

Formed a decade ago to provide Southern Baptists with a way to participate individually in the BJC after the Southern Baptist Convention pulled out of the coalition, the Religious Liberty Council also accepts non-Baptist members who share the organization's commitment to the separation of church and state.

The RLC is one of 14 "supporting bodies" of the BJC. Others include the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Alliance of Baptists and Baptist state conventions in Texas, Virginia and North Carolina.

The BJC board also elected a slate of new officers, led by president Reggie McDonough, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia. He succeeds June McEwen of Chattanooga, Tenn., whose term ends.

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## **Midwestern trustees call special meeting**

By Bob Allen

KANSAS CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- For the second time in a little over two years, trustees of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., have been summoned to a called meeting to discuss leadership issues.

Trustee chairman C.M. "Buster" Brown notified board members Oct. 1 of a special meeting scheduled Oct. 8-9. The subject of the called meeting was disclosed only as "personnel matters," but sources indicate that a number of trustees are displeased with the seminary's new president, Phil Roberts.

Trustee Gary Peek from Moss Point, Miss., wrote and sent an e-mail to fellow board members in August raising questions about travel expenses and allegations of policy violations by Roberts, whom trustees elected president in January.

Peek and other trustees requested a special meeting then to discuss reports that Roberts had charged the seminary for his family's travel expenses for a trip to Europe and disciplined the school's vice president for business and finance, Michael Whitehead, when he refused to reimburse the funds.

Other concerns listed by Peek included a perception that Roberts was noncommittal about a proposal to move the seminary out of Kansas City, Mo., despite previous votes by the board of trustees to stay put.

Both Roberts and board chairman Brown wrote back to Peek denying the charges and chastising him for not first raising the issues in private. Brown denied the request for an August board meeting, however, saying it failed to meet a deadline requiring two weeks notice for a called meeting.

"If any of your charges are true, then I should be dismissed," Roberts wrote in a letter to Peek dated Aug. 24 and forwarded anonymously to Associated Baptist Press, along with Peek's original e-mail and Brown's response. "As well, no SBC church or entity should hire a person whose ethical conduct is reflective of the charges stated in your e-mail."

"If I were not a Christian leading a Christian institution," Roberts continued, "then my first response would be to hand this matter over to my lawyer."

Though some trustees circulated material critical of Roberts before his election, the board -- after a lengthy interview held in executive session -- elected him unanimously Jan. 9.

Roberts' election followed a 16-month search after trustees fired his predecessor, Mark Coppenger, over conflict with faculty and administrative staff that trustees concluded diminished his ability to lead.

Roberts, 50, a former vice president at the Southern Baptist North American Mission Board, began his new job in February.

Sources said some trustees are so dissatisfied with Roberts' leadership that they would vote to fire him.

Southern Baptist Convention president James Merritt, who by virtue of his office is a member of all SBC trustee boards, reportedly planned to attend the upcoming Oct. 8-9 meeting, apparently in Roberts' defense.

The board's next regularly scheduled meeting is Oct. 22-23 and planned in conjunction with Roberts' inauguration ceremony as the Southern Baptist seminary's fourth president.

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