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Bush pushes religious freedom in speech broadcast across China

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Calling America "a nation guided by faith," President Bush said Feb. 22 China should embrace rather than fear religious freedom.

"Freedom of religion is not something to be feared, it's to be welcomed," Bush said in a speech to university students in Beijing that was broadcast across China. Faith, he said, "gives us a moral core and teaches us to hold ourselves to high standards, to love and to serve others and to live responsible lives."

Bush said 95 percent of Americans say they believe in God, "and I'm one of them." He described sharing with Chinese president Jiang Zemin a few months ago in Shanghai how "faith changed my life and how faith contributes to the life of my country."

"Faith points to a moral law beyond man's law and calls us to duties higher than material gain," he said.

Bush told students at Tsinghua University that he welcomes changes that are moving China toward democratic elections and spawning a renewed interest in religion.

"Tens of millions of Chinese today are relearning Buddhist, Taoist and local religious traditions, or practicing Christianity, Islam and other faiths," Bush said. "Regardless of where or how these believers worship, they're no threat to public order. In fact, they make good citizens. For centuries this country has had a tradition of religious tolerance. My prayer is that all persecution will end, so that all in China are free to gather and worship as they wish."

The remarks were stronger than others by Bush given a day earlier in a joint press conference with the Chinese president. According to news reports, Bush appeared uncomfortable as President Jiang defended a recent crackdown on illegal religious activities in China.

"Whatever religion people believe in, they have to abide by the law," Jiang said. "So some of these law-breakers have been detained because of their violation of the law, not because of their religious belief."

Prior to his tour of Asia, groups that monitor abuses of religious freedom urged Bush to press the issue while in China.

The Washington-based human-rights organization Freedom House recently issued a report claiming evidence of an official crackdown of large unregistered Christian churches and other religions across China.

The new tactic involves labeling religious groups -- like unregistered Protestant and Catholic churches and the Falun Gong sect -- as "heretical cults" that are banned in a 1999 law labeling them a threat to national security, the report says.

Amid international pressure, a Chinese court recently gave a Hong Kong businessman a reduced sentence of two years in prison for smuggling Bibles. Had he been convicted of the original charge of violating anti-cult laws, Lai Kwong-keung could have faced life in prison or even death.

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State WMU board requests reversal of SBC policies

By Ken Camp

CEDAR HILL, Texas (ABP) -- In a highly unusual move, leaders of Woman's Missionary Union of Texas have formally requested three Southern Baptist Convention executives to reverse recent actions they believe hinder Baptists' witness.

The state WMU's board of directors called for Jerry Rankin, president of the International Mission Board, to reconsider his recent request that all IMB missionaries affirm agreement with the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

"This is untenable," the letter to Rankin states. "Since all missionaries processed since June 2000 have signed the 2000 'Baptist Faith and Message,' this is a directive to veteran missionaries who have given their lives in service to God and who have trusted Southern Baptists to support and pray for them, not look upon them with suspicion and distrust."

Another letter asked North American Mission Board President Robert Reccord to lead the trustees to reverse a new policy denying endorsement as chaplain to ordained women.

The letter said the new policy would prevent women from serving as chaplains in the military and prisons. "These women have not been ordained into a pastoral role, but their service to the Lord's work is just as valuable and necessary as that of a pastor," it says.

Finally, WMU leaders objected to a recent letter from SBC Executive Committee President Morris Chapman urging Texas churches to designate gifts through the Baptist General Convention of Texas or to bypass the state convention entirely and send funds straight to the Executive Committee in Nashville, Tenn.

Texas WMU directors affirmed last year's reallocation of funds in the BGCT's adopted budget and urged the SBC "to work with the Baptist General Convention of Texas when issues arise, rather than making direct appeals to churches."

The Texas WMU doesn't speak for leaders of the national WMU, the SBC's auxiliary for missions support.

During discussion, questions were raised about possible negative repercussions for national WMU or other state WMU organizations. "We just cannot be silent," said board member Nelda Gerbine of Cleburne.

The letters, drafted by a task force assigned to address "critical issues," received unanimous approval from 33 board members at a Feb. 21 meeting.

In their letter to Rankin, the WMU leaders said his action has "created distress and uncertainty" among missionaries.

"We who have supported missionaries and missions through prayer, giving, and affirming our children in their calls to missions want you to know of our concern for the impact of this decision on missionaries, their families, friends and prayer supporters in the U.S. and mission work around the world," the letter says.

"We urge you to reconsider this position as a first step in re-establishing the trust upon which our denomination has been built since 1845."

The letter to Reccord said NAMB's new policy on endorsement of chaplains "seems to discriminate against women." Women speaking to the motion said they had talked to both male and female chaplains who object to the change.

The WMU board's letter to Chapman notes that through the BGCT Cooperative Program in 2001, Texas Baptist churches gave more than \$18.2 million to SBC missions causes, plus \$12.9 million to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for International Missions and \$5.3 million to the Annie Armstrong Easter Offering for North American Missions.

"Because Woman's Missionary Union of Texas seeks to create an environment that enables individuals and churches to fulfill the Great Commission, and because our vision is to see that individuals and churches pursue and embrace prayer, ministry and service that reflect a world vision and passion for declaring God's glory to all people, we stand together to affirm the churches of the Baptist General Convention of Texas in decisions concerning distribution of Cooperative Program funds," the letter states.

In her report to the board, Texas WMU Executive Director Carolyn Porterfield said the actions by the mission boards and the SBC Executive Committee "impact the cause of Christ around the world."

She said a commitment to missions and the call of conscience prompted the women to speak out.

"We feel the need to speak, not to cause division, but rather to allow our voices to be heard and to be true to our conscience," Porterfield said.

Rankin has defended his letter to missionaries, saying that Southern Baptists have a right to hold their missionaries doctrinally accountable and expressing confidence that few, if any, missionaries will refuse to sign.

A chaplain's commission proposing the new NAMB policy on endorsement said most Southern Baptists regard ordination as being for senior pastors and not subordinate church staff positions. The "Baptist Faith and Message" says the Bible limits the pastoral role to men.

In his letter to Texas Baptists, Chapman reminded churches that changes made to the BGCT adopted budget reduced funding for SBC seminaries, Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission and the Executive Committee. He encouraged churches to ask the BGCT to distribute funds through the former Cooperative Program formula or to send SBC gifts directly to the Executive Committee.

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