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Former pastor faces 10 counts of sexual assault of two teen girls

By Michael Leathers

OLNEY, Ill. (ABP) -- If things had gone as planned, 35-year-old Leslie Mason would have preached the keynote sermon at this year's annual meeting of the Illinois Baptist State Association Nov. 7.

Instead the former pastor of Olney Southern Baptist Church faces 10 counts of criminal sexual assault involving two teenage girls who attended his southeastern Illinois congregation.

The latest charges against Mason were filed Oct. 24 by the Illinois Attorney General's office, which took over prosecution of the case at the request of the local state's attorney. Mason pleaded not guilty Oct. 27 during a preliminary hearing in the Richland County Courthouse in Olney. A jury trial is scheduled for March.

Mason was first charged with two counts of criminal sexual assault a year ago, just days before sources say IBSA leaders had planned to nominate him to preach the convention sermon in 2002.

The association's two top elected officials at the time, Tim Lewis and Pat Pajak, both pastors, met with the state association's committee on order of business and advised them of the pending charges.

The committee agreed to remove Mason's name and instead recommended that messengers elect André Dobson, pastor of Calvary Baptist of Alton, to deliver the high-profile message.

Mason had been pastor of Olney Southern Baptist since 1994. Church members unanimously voted to dismiss him during a special meeting on Oct. 24, 2001, according to a copy of the church's minutes on file in the Richland County Circuit Clerk's office. An e-mail addressed from one of the alleged victims to Mason, also on file at the courthouse, says the girl was 13 years old when the two began having sexual relations.

Before his arrest, Mason's star had been on the rise in leadership among the state's Southern Baptists. He was vice chairman of the constitution-and-bylaws committee. He was also spokesman for a group of conservative pastors seeking inclusion of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" into the IBSA's constitution. He was appointed to the national Southern Baptist Convention's committee on committees in 1997.

Mason is a graduate of Mid-America Baptist Theological Seminary of Germantown, Tenn., where he earned a master's degree in religion and education, and of Southwest Baptist University of Bolivar, Mo.

If found guilty on all 10 counts, Mason could face up to 150 years in prison. Each count is a Class 1 felony, carrying a sentence of four to 15 years.

Election results may affect balance of church-state issues

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Republicans capturing the Senate Nov. 5 might translate into more federal judges being appointed that are hostile to the separation of church and state, observers say.

Judicial appointments became a bone of contention in the 107th Congress, as a Democratic-controlled Senate Judiciary Committee held up President Bush's appointment of several judges along party lines. Democrats accused the president of offering a stream of "activist" judges, whom they feared would infuse their conservative politics into interpretation of the law.

Gridlock is nothing new in judicial appointments. During President Clinton's two terms, Republicans then in charge of the Judiciary Committee blocked nominees favored by Democrats.

The 10-year stalemate has produced an unusually high vacancy rate among federal judges, and Senate Republicans see regaining control of the Judiciary Committee as a window of opportunity to push through as many Bush nominees as possible.

The new state of affairs pleases Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

"The retaking of the Senate ... will end the shameful constitutional obstruction by the former Democrat majority in the Senate Judiciary Committee," Land said in a statement.

"Given the role the federal judiciary plays -- desired or not, in modern society," Land said, "the impact of the election -- in terms of beginning to remake the federal judiciary in George W. Bush's pro-life, pro-family, limited-government philosophy -- may well be revolutionary."

Barry Lynn, head of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, admitted that Republican control of the Judiciary Committee means that more "bad appointments" would be made, but perhaps fewer than some church-state separationists fear.

"This election has created new challenges, but you know, frankly, if you take some socially conscious Republicans, some Independents and some Democrats and add them all up, you have enough people to stop genuinely terrible judicial appointments," Lynn said. "I guess it's our job, those of us in this business of protecting civil liberties, to make it clear how bad these nominees are."

Observers are particularly interested in whether the Republican-controlled Senate will entice Chief Justice William Rehnquist to retire after 30 years on the U.S. Supreme Court. If he steps down, President Bush and a conservative-controlled Judiciary Committee would pick his successor.

Any change in makeup is potentially significant in a Supreme Court that for years has been narrowly divided between those who support a strict separation of church and state and "accommodationists," who believe the government can and should promote religion in non-preferential ways.

While Lynn is among the most ardent supporters of the separationist view, he also isn't overly alarmed by the prospect of having conservatives picking a replacement for Rehnquist.

"You can't get much more conservative than the chief justice, so I don't think that it changes the equation for many of the social issues before the court," Lynn said.

The full Senate would have to give final approval to any Supreme Court appointment, Lynn said, and an extremely conservative nominee would likely run into confirmation problems from moderate Republicans as well as Democrats.

As of Nov. 7, there were 47 Democrats, 51 Republicans and one independent in possession of Senate seats for the 108th Congress. One race remains unresolved. Louisiana's unique electoral laws require a December runoff to decide if Democrat Mary Landrieu returns to the Senate.

In the House, Republicans added a few seats to their thin majority.

Ken Connor, president of the Family Research Council, declared the election a major success for the Religious Right.

"On balance, this was a significant victory for our pro-family issues," Connor said in a statement. "Pro-family and pro-life forces in the House and Senate were strengthened, and President Bush emerged from the evening as a potent political power."

Baptists on the ballot in the Nov. 5 congressional elections had mixed results.

Sen. Jean Carnahan (D-Mo.), a member of First Baptist Church of Rolla, Mo., narrowly lost her bid to complete the final four years of the term to which she had been appointed in 2000, to serve in the stead of her late husband. Although she was rated one of the 10 most conservative Democrats in the Senate, she lost to the Religious Right-backed Republican Jim Talent, a former House member who opposes abortion rights.

Sen. Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.) -- an ordained minister and until recently a member of First Baptist Church of Bentonville, Ark. -- lost a re-election bid to moderate Democrat Mark Pryor, son of a former Arkansas governor and U.S. Senator. Hutchinson had been dogged by scandal among his conservative base since he divorced his wife of nearly 30 years and married a much-younger former staffer in 2000.

Rep. Dick Gephardt (D-Mo.), a member of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis, handily won his re-election bid, but is expected to resign as House Minority Leader due to his party's poor showing in the elections.

Fortune turned more positive, meanwhile, for Trent Lott, a member of First Baptist Church of Pascagoula, Miss. Lott will regain his former office as Senate Majority Leader, which he lost to Sen. Tom Daschle (D-S.D.) in 2001.

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News briefs from ABP's Washington bureau

Muslim sues Chick-fil-A

HOUSTON -- A Houston Muslim has sued the Chick-fil-A corporation, alleging managers discriminated against him because he is not a Christian.

Aziz Latif, 25, said he was fired after refusing to pray to Jesus during a training session. The suit, filed Oct. 21, says that just a week before his firing, Aziz had received a performance evaluation from a superior praising him as a "great manager." The suit also says that Aziz had worked for the fast-food chain since 1996. He is asking for reinstatement of his job as well as damages.

Truett Cathy founded the Georgia-based firm in 1946 as a company devoted to biblical principles. Chick-fil-A stores are closed on Sundays. However, federal law prevents for-profit companies from discriminating in hiring on the basis of religion.

Company president Dan Cathy said he doubted the suit had merit and that Chick-fil-A's religious principles had served it well, according to the St. Petersburg Times. (ABP)

Judge to rule in Ten Commandments case

MONTGOMERY, Ala. -- A federal judge has said he will rule by Nov. 18 in the case of an Alabama Supreme Court justice who had a monument honoring the Ten Commandments secretly installed in the state judicial building.

Three Alabama attorneys sued Roy Moore, the court's chief justice, after he had a 5,300-pound granite monument to the Protestant King James version of the commandments installed in the building's rotunda. The action took place in the middle of night without public notice or the consent of his fellow justices, but Moore asserts he did that to insulate the other justices from being named in the lawsuit he was certain would result.

The attorneys said Moore's action constitutes a government endorsement of religion, something banned by the First Amendment. But Moore argued he was merely acknowledging the commandments as a moral basis for the American system of law.

U.S. District Judge Myron Thompson said Oct. 23 that he would focus on the question presented by Moore's attorneys: "Can the state acknowledge God?" (ABP)

Restrictive religion law in Belarus takes effect

WASHINGTON -- A Halloween signature by Belarus President Alexander Lukashenko has placed it to effect a religion law that is one of the most repressive in all the former Soviet republics.

The new law effectively establishes the majority Russian Orthodox Church as the favored state religion and makes worship and other activities much more difficult for minority religious groups. The measure outlaws religious activity by "unregistered" religious groups while making it nearly impossible for many current Belarussian minority religious groups to register.

Belarus' minority religious communities -- Protestants, Eastern Rite Catholics, Muslims and Jews among them -- have banded together to oppose the legislation, which passed the nation's upper legislative house 46-2 with the full support of Orthodox leaders.

Orthodox leaders and politicians said the law was needed to protect "traditional" religious groups from cults. (ABP)

Florida survey finds return to public schools

MIAMI -- A newspaper study says more than a fourth of the Florida students who accepted vouchers to pay for tuition at private schools this semester have transferred back to the public school system. In a Nov. 3 story on the study, the Miami Herald found that 170 students out of the 607 statewide who in the summer had requested vouchers for the fall 2002 semester had already returned to public schools.

Florida's voucher program -- one of only three publicly funded voucher programs in the country -- gives students in public schools the state deems to be "failing" scholarships that may be spent on tuition at private schools, including religious ones.

Voucher opponents say the practice is unconstitutional, although the U.S. Supreme Court has recently upheld an Ohio voucher program. Voucher supporters say many students who are "trapped" in underperforming public schools get better educations in private schools.

But a mother of a voucher child who had returned her child to public schools said the education at the Christian school her child transferred to was no better. "They teach a lot about the Bible, but you can't get a job based on the Bible," parent Sheila Evans told the paper. "You need knowledge." (ABP)

Iran equalizes 'blood money' for non-Muslim men

WASHINGTON -- Iran's reform-minded parliament has given initial approval to a law that would equalize treatment of Muslim and non-Muslim men -- after they are dead.

According to the BBC, the measure would equalize the "blood money" payments that murderers make to the families of their male murder victims in lieu of execution.

Under Iran's previous "blood money" statutes, non-Muslim men were valued at 1/12 of Muslim men. Blood-money payments for Muslim women are half the rate paid for men. Officials said the law would apply to non-Muslim men of Iran's "traditional" minority religions, including Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.

The law must still be approved by the nation's conservative religious council. However, it reportedly has the support of Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the nation's supreme religious leader. (ABP)

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- By Robert Marus

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