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Bush eulogizes astronauts during memorial service

By Ken Camp

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

February 5, 2003

Volume: 03-13-3440

HOUSTON (ABP) – President Bush comforted the families of the Columbia space shuttle crew and paid tribute to “seven lives of great purpose and achievement” during a Feb. 4 memorial service at the Johnson Space Center.

“You are not alone,” Bush told the assembled family and friends of the astronauts who were killed when their craft broke apart over Texas four days earlier. “In time, you will find comfort and the grace to see you through. And in God’s own time, we can pray that the day of your reunion will come.”

More than 10,000 people gathered inside the Space Center quadrangle for the tribute.

“The cause of exploration and discovery is not an option we choose. It is a desire written in the human heart. We are that part of creation which seeks to understand all creation,” Bush said. “We find the best among us, send them forth into unmapped darkness, and pray they will return. They go in peace for all mankind, and all mankind is in their debt.”

Religious references and expressions of faith permeated the service for the astronauts, who included several Christians, a Hindu born in India and a Jewish Israeli.

A Navy choir led the crowd in singing “God of Our Fathers,” and an Armed Forces band played other hymns. Navy chaplains – one Christian, one Jewish – prayed and read the 23rd Psalm in both English and Hebrew.

Bush, NASA Administrator Sean O’Keefe and Navy Capt. Kent Rominger, chief of the astronaut corps, each added distinctive brushstrokes as together they painted a verbal portrait of the seven Columbia astronauts.

Col. Rick Husband, shuttle mission commander, was remembered as having encouraged his crew by reciting from memory a lengthy passage from the Old Testament book of Joshua that includes the admonition, “Be strong and courageous.”

Bush described the loss of the Columbia crew as “sudden and terrible,” but he focused his remarks primarily on the astronauts’ lives, not their deaths.

“To leave behind earth and air and gravity is an ancient dream of humanity. For these seven, it was a dream fulfilled,” he said.

After the public memorial service, Bush met privately with the families for about 40 minutes.

At least 200 people, including half a dozen victim-relief chaplains, stood beside a makeshift memorial surrounding the sign outside the Space Center entrance. During the memorial service, they “stood in silence, listening reverently” and watching the tribute on four television monitors set up at the Space Center entrance, according to Mike Brittain of Diana, Texas, a chaplain with Victim Relief Ministries, a program originated by Texas Baptist Men.

“Afterwards, people wanted to share their thoughts. They wanted to reflect on the service and talk about how meaningful it was to them,” said Brittain.

The six victim-relief chaplains provided visitors and NASA employees an opportunity to talk, pray and unburden themselves. They set up a tent near the Space Center’s front gate, designating it as a “prayer center.”

Brittain particularly remembered one woman who identified herself as the wife of an astronaut. “She came up and hugged my neck and prayed with me,” he said, his voice choked with emotion. “She said we’d never really know just how much it meant to them for us just to be here for them. She said she knew God was being magnified, not us, through what we’re doing.”

Bush's budget proposal raises church-state concerns**By Robert Marus****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****February 5, 2003****Volume: 03-13-3441**

WASHINGTON (ABP) – Parts of President Bush's proposal for the 2004 federal budget have caught public officials by surprise and raised concern among groups that oppose expanding government funding for religious organizations.

Members of Congress and the media received Bush's budget request Feb. 3. It contains two voucher programs that would provide federal funds that could in turn be used to pay for social services performed by religious institutions. One is a \$756 million plan that would allow children in underperforming District of Columbia schools to use federal vouchers – scholarships – to pay for tuition at area private schools, including parochial schools.

The other proposal is a \$600 million plan to provide treatment funds to as many as 300,000 drug and alcohol addicts over the next three years. The clients would use the funds they are given to pay for addiction treatment and drug rehabilitation at the program of their choice – including religious programs.

Saying that "there is power, wonder-working power, in the goodness and idealism and faith of the American people," Bush announced the drug-rehab plan in his Jan. 28 State of the Union address. He included it in lengthier discussion of his "faith-based initiatives" – a plan to fund some of the government's social services through private providers, including religious groups. However, until that announcement, the Bush White House had been advocating for such funding in direct grants, rather than voucher-type proposals that allow individuals to decide where the money goes rather than the government.

Groups that interpret the First Amendment as establishing a strict separation of church and state oppose government funding for such programs.

"To this point, the aggressive pursuit of the president's faith-based agenda has shown a lack of appreciation for church-state separation as the best means for protecting religious liberty," said Holly Hollman, general counsel of the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs. "We welcome the president's interest in the work that religious organizations do to promote healing in our society. We just hope that he does not try to demonstrate his compassion by trampling on the First Amendment."

The White House did not announce the voucher proposal for District of Columbia schools prior to the release of the budget, taking District officials and members of Congress by surprise. According to the Washington Post, D.C. public-school officials were not aware of the proposal and are adamantly opposed to it.

Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton (D-D.C.), the District's non-voting representative in the House, also expressed her opposition to the proposal. And Rep. Thomas Davis III (R-Va.), chairman of the House committee that oversees much of the District's governmental work, said he had not been briefed about the proposal ahead of time.

A spokesman in D.C. Mayor Anthony Williams' office also said the city would not accept the proposal. "The mayor is not going to commit the District to any voucher initiative," said spokesman Tony Bullock, according to the newspaper. "He is opposed to vouchers. The council is opposed to vouchers. Vouchers are not on the table."

However, the Washington Post also reported that administration officials gave conflicting reports Feb. 3 about whether the program would proceed without the cooperation of D.C. officials. Secretary of Education Rod Paige reportedly said Bush would proceed with the plan only with the cooperation of the city officials. However, later in the day, the newspaper reported, another Department of Education spokesman said the administration would consider channeling the voucher funds through a private foundation rather than the school district.

Previous plans to institute voucher-type programs in the District of Columbia have failed both with local voters and in Congress. However, members of Congress have already promised to propose new voucher-program legislation.

Barry Lynn, president of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the "exorbitant cost" of tuition at

non-religious private schools in Washington would almost certainly mean that any vouchers would be spent at religious schools, which are often subsidized by churches or denominations. "This scheme would force taxpayers to pay for religious indoctrination," Lynn said. "That's unfair and an intrusion into all Americans' right to support only the religious institutions of their free choice."

However, the Supreme Court upheld the constitutionality of an Ohio school-voucher program last year even though the vast majority of the vouchers went to students in religious schools. On a 5-4 vote, the court's majority said government did not directly support religion through the program because the parents and children who received the vouchers had a "genuine private choice" between public, private non-religious and religious school options.



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Historic Houston church calls Stephen Wells as pastor**By ABP staff****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****February 5, 2003****Volume: 03-13-3442**

HOUSTON (ABP) – One of Texas' most historic and progressive Baptist churches has called a young Mississippian to be its pastor. South Main Baptist Church of Houston voted unanimously Feb. 2 to call Stephen Wells to its pulpit.

Wells, 34, has been pastor of Highland Colony Baptist Church in Ridgeland, Miss., for the past three years. He previously served three other churches as pastor. He also has previous Texas experience – he was part of the first graduating class at Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary, where he received his master of divinity degree in 1997. Wells is scheduled to receive his doctoral degree from Truett later this year.

Wells also has a direct connection to South Main. His father-in-law, Dan Yeary, was an associate pastor at the church during the 1970s. Wells and his wife, Missy, have three children.

"His dedication to the gospel and to evangelism is clear, and the fact that he is young will be attractive to both the young and the old," said Peter Almond, chair of the church's pastor search committee. "He is very committed to moderate Baptist principles, and he fully supports South Main's position on those."

South Main, which is celebrating its 100th anniversary this year, is located near downtown Houston. The church has a history of progressive stances on issues such as civil rights and the role women in church leadership.



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