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Baptist Press fires writer for 'errors' in story about education secretary

By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

April 15, 2003

Volume: 03-35-3533

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention's news service has fired one of its contributing writers over his handling of a story that made national headlines.

On April 11, Baptist Press announced that it had discontinued use of articles authored by Todd Starnes because of "factual and contextual errors" in an April 7 Baptist Press story appearing under his byline.

The story was a profile of U.S. Education Secretary Rod Paige. Some of the things Starnes quoted Paige as saying caused several church-state watchdogs and public-school advocates in Washington to call for Paige's resignation.

According to Starnes' story, Paige said that he "would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith." Baptist Press also reported Paige considered "the animosity to God in public school settings" as "puzzling," and characterized him as comparing the diversity of thought and belief found in public-school settings unfavorably with the strong values taught in religious schools.

Paige is a member of Brentwood Baptist Church in Houston, Texas, where he serves as a deacon. The predominantly African-American congregation is affiliated with the SBC.

Starnes is director of university communications at the Baptist-related Union University in Jackson, Tenn., and a former assistant editor at Baptist Press. The news agency released the story April 8. The Washington Post ran a story on Paige's comments April 9, and other national news organizations began reporting on it soon after.

Several public-school advocacy and civil-rights groups attacked Paige's reported comments, including the American Federation of Teachers and Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

Some members of Congress also called on Paige to apologize for his remarks or resign. A group of 12 House members, led by Rep. Jerrold Nadler (D-N.Y.), sent Paige a letter April 10. "No one is suggesting that parents should not have the right to send their children to a religious school of their own choosing," the letter said. "What is troubling is that the government's top education official would appear to prefer educational institutions that are reserved to one denomination, and who views the presence of children with different religious beliefs as detrimental to a sound education."

The letter asked Paige to resign if he is still "unprepared to make clear that this sort of religious bigotry has no place in the Department of Education."

Paige attempted to clarify his remarks in a press conference April 9. "I understand completely and respect the separation of church and state," Paige said, adding that his preference for schools with Christian values was only a personal choice and had nothing to do with his job as the nation's top public-education official. He also emphasized that he was talking about institutions of higher learning, not elementary or secondary schools.

Although Paige's spokesman initially described Starnes' quotations as "accurate," according to the Washington Post's April 9 story, on April 10 Paige aides issued reporters what they said was a more accurate quotation, based on a tape of the interview. In the partial transcript, Starnes posed a question about whether public or Christian universities had "the best deal."

According to the transcript, Paige responded: "Each of them have real strong points and some of them have some vulnerabilities, but you know, all things being equal, I'd prefer to have a child in a school where there's a strong appreciation for values, the kinds of values that I think are associated with the Christian communities, so that this child can be brought up in an environment that teaches them to have strong faith and to understand that there is a force greater than them personally."

The BP story had quoted Paige as responding: "All things equal, I would prefer to have a child in a school that has a strong appreciation for the values of the Christian community, where a child is taught to have a strong faith.... Where a child is taught that, there is a source of strength greater than themselves."

Paige, in the news conference, said his quotations had been taken out of context in a way that caused people to believe he was discussing a preference for Christian values in K-12 education rather than that on the college level. He also said he had said nothing for which he should apologize or resign.

According to the Post's April 10 follow-up article, however, Starnes said that the other quotations that critics had found offensive were accurate and that he had characterized them in proper context.

Barry Lynn of Americans United for Separation of Church and State said April 10 that Paige's attempt at clarification didn't ease his concerns about the interview as a whole. "This, to me, just adds new confusion; it doesn't add any clarification," Lynn said. "He doesn't seem to understand what the problem was initially – and that is that he seemed to be disparaging public schools at every level, and the integrity of values that come from non-Christian traditions."

Lynn said he was disappointed that Paige hadn't repudiated the statements without qualification. "As a result, I don't think he should continue to serve as the secretary of education," Lynn concluded.

Brent Walker, head of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, offered more muted criticism.

"I appreciate Secretary Paige's clarification," Walker said. "Baptist Press may have twisted his words. Nevertheless, it's not enough for the chief public-education official in the federal government simply to say he favors the separation of church and state. I'd like him also to affirm that the public schools belong to all citizens – regardless of their religion or even lack of faith."

Alex Wohl, spokesman for the American Federation of Teachers, said the union will take a wait-and-see attitude regarding Paige's fitness for the office. "We'll keep a watch as to whether he's as strong an advocate of public education as he says he is," Wohl said.

Some prominent Religious Right supporters defended Paige, including former Education Secretary Bill Bennett and Family Research Council head Ken Connor. "These are the sentiments of a Baptist deacon, which Secretary Paige is, and not an intolerant bigot," Connor wrote in the April 10 edition of his "Washington Update" e-mail newsletter. "The left's attack on Secretary Paige is an example of the intolerant anti-Christian bigotry among radical secularists who would drive any recognition of faith from the public square."

Paige also reportedly said his other comments were not meant to denigrate the religious and ethnic diversity present in America's public schools, but rather intended to say that schools with students and teachers from diverse belief systems face greater challenges than those with an agreed-upon set of moral and theological commitments.

The BP article had quoted Paige as saying, "The reason that Christian schools and Christian universities are growing is a result of a strong value system.... In a religious environment the value system is set. That's not the case in a public school where there are so many different kids with different kinds of values."

Starnes' story also had characterized Paige's comments on Christian versus secular colleges as responding to the "animosity to God in public schools." In the lead paragraph of the story, Starnes summed up Paige's statements on public schools as asserting that "Christian values should have a place in the nation's educational enterprise."

BP ran the transcript of the interview April 11 "to counter any confusion," according to an editor's note. "The report accurately portrayed the substance of Dr. Paige's faith in God but contained factual and contextual errors in other respects," the note said. "We regret the misrepresentations by the writer. Todd Starnes has been a trusted correspondent but no longer will be employed to write for Baptist Press."

IMB's Rankin sets deadline for missionaries to sign

By Tony Cartledge

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

April 15, 2003

Volume: 03-35-3534

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) — Jerry Rankin, president of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board, is telling missionaries who have not affirmed the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message faith statement they must do so by May 5 or be terminated.

This marks the first time IMB officials have used the word "terminate" to describe the consequences of failing to sign the affirmation.

Rankin first requested all IMB missionaries to sign an affirmation of the faith statement more than a year ago, and the vast majority of the 5,500 overseas workers have. But 73 career missionaries have not affirmed the document, according to the IMB. Forty-two have resigned or plan to.

In letters sent April 11 to the 31 others, Rankin urged most of the missionaries to affirm the statement or resign rather than face firing. In an excerpt from one letter released by the IMB, Rankin wrote: "I am grateful for your years of service and would be delighted if you should decide to affirm the current Baptist Faith and Message and continue your effective ministry with the IMB. Apart from that, I would like to ask that you consider resigning rather than maintaining a position that would undermine the integrity and credibility of the IMB. If I do not hear from you regarding one of these options by May 5, 2003, I will be recommending that the board take action to terminate your service in their May meeting."

Six of the 31 missionaries were not offered the option of affirming the faith statement, which was revised in 2000 to include the more conservative positions of the current Southern Baptist leaders. Those six missionaries "have clearly and publicly stated positions contrary to the BF&M that are beyond acceptable parameters," Rankin said. "They have adamantly refused to be accountable to the IMB and Southern Baptist churches as requested."

The six were invited to resign or be terminated.

The board is not releasing the names of the 31 missionaries who received the ultimatum.

In the past year, 32 missionaries resigned citing the new faith statement as a factor in their decisions. The resignations of another eight people are expected at the IMB trustee meeting in May. Another couple has decided to resign in August, bringing the total to 42. Other missionaries have resigned without citing the faith statement as the reason.

Five "units" (or missionary couples) who qualify are being offered the option of retiring with full benefits, according to the IMB.

"We have total confidence in our missionaries, and my initial letter was a collective appeal to assure Southern Baptists of the doctrinal integrity of the missionaries they send and support," Rankin said. "However, the failure of some to affirm their accountability undercuts the credibility and support of all missionaries serving with the IMB in a time of remarkable evangelistic harvest and unprecedented opportunities."

"We deeply regret losing any missionary, but we are accountable to the churches in this matter. If a missionary's disagreements are so great that he or she cannot in good conscience promise to work in harmony with the BF&M, we feel he or she has an obligation to Southern Baptists to tell them so.

"This final letter is to once again appeal to these missionaries to affirm they will work in accord with the Baptist Faith and Message."

- Compiled by Tony Cartledge

Texas Baptists aiding missionaries who resign over faith statement**By John Hall****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****April 15, 2003****Volume: 03-35-3535**

DALLAS (ABP) -- The missionary transition fund of the Baptist General Convention of Texas has supported 41 missionaries who resigned or were terminated after refusing to affirm the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message.

The BGCT has dispersed more than \$526,760 in financial assistance to missionaries since it was started last year. Pledges and gifts to the fund total more than \$1.3 million. Thirteen missionaries currently are receiving financial assistance from the account.

As of March 31, 141 overseas and stateside missionaries have contacted the Texas Baptist transition team to voice their concern about the requirement that all International Mission Board missionaries and all new North American Mission Board missionaries sign the revised faith statement.

This number includes 45 IMB career missionaries who have resigned, 12 pending IMB resignations, nine IMB retirements and two terminated IMB missionaries. It also includes two North American Mission Board missionaries who resigned and two terminated NAMB missionaries. The numbers differ slightly from those reported by IMB because not all of those who are resigning have yet informed the IMB, Texas officials say.

The financial assistance has provided a cushion for missionaries who sacrificed their jobs on principle with no other position waiting for them, said Ron Gunter, who received funds for six weeks. "We came back with nothing waiting in the wings for us," said Gunter, now a BGCT regional representative in Houston. "We had no idea what we were going to do, but we knew we could not stay with the IMB."

The transition fund "provided for all our needs because we had nothing to fall back on. We had given everything on the field. It was our livelihood."

Frank Dudley, who resigned from the IMB while on furlough in the United States, received money from the fund for several months before becoming director of Howard Payne University's Harlingen extension center. The BGCT monetary support helped pay bills, but it also served more as a symbolic reminder that others understood Dudley's stance and supported him, he said.

"It meant more in terms of moral support than financial support," the former West Africa missionary said. "It told us somebody in Texas knew who we were, approved of the choice we had made."

Missionaries can be marked for the duration of their ministries for choosing not to sign the Baptist Faith and Message, Dudley said. He said he knows missionaries who are struggling to find a new position after refusing to sign. "We recognize we probably had the easiest journey of anyone we know," Dudley said. "We are very fortunate."



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Missionary says faith statement misstates Bible's view of marriage

By Mark Wingfield

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

April 15, 2003

Volume: 03-35-3536

(ABP) -- The 2000 Baptist Faith and Message has it backward in describing the correlation between marriage and the union between Christ and the church, according to a veteran Southern Baptist missionary who has resigned.

Bill McCall and his wife, Judy, served 26 years in Togo with the Southern Baptist Convention's International Mission Board. He has been a seminary professor.

Like at least 42 other IMB missionaries, the McCalls have resigned rather than sign an affirmation of the 2000 Baptist Faith and Message as required by IMB president Jerry Rankin. The professor's reason, however, is somewhat different than the explanations given by others who have not signed.

He cites the document's Article 18 on the family. The second sentence of that section states that marriage "is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and his church."

That states the biblical teaching in reverse, McCall insists. "Does the Bible teach that marriage is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and his church? I checked all of the Bible references given and could not find this. In effect, Paul taught the Ephesians the opposite, that Christ's relationship with the church teaches what the marriage relationship should be like."

In Ephesians 5:22-32, verses cited by the SBC document, the Apostle Paul "puts the emphasis on Christ and his love for the church," McCall said. "The emphasis in this teaching is the responsibility of the man to ensure that the marriage relationship be correct in God's sight. To state that marriage is God's unique gift to reveal the union between Christ and his church reverses what the Bible states."

Marriage may offer a good metaphor for the relationship between Christ and the church if the marriage is good, McCall explained, but Jesus offers a more perfect example for marriage. "Jesus always fulfills his responsibilities to the church; therefore he is a perfect example, always. Man is an imperfect example; Christ is the perfect example."

To test his reading of the passage, the professor copied the second paragraph of this article from the Baptist Faith and Message and showed it to his third-year New Testament students in Togo without explaining the statement's origin. He asked the students to find biblical references to support the statement.

"When I asked them how it was coming, they were apparently troubled," he said. "Since they thought I had written the statements, they were reluctant to criticize them. When I explained that I had not written them, they were quite free in stating that they could not find any references to support this very part of the statements that had troubled me."

McCall said he could not in good conscience sign and pledge to teach in accordance with such a doctrinal statement.

"That does not mean that I question the need for accountability to our board," he said. "It does mean that if I find conflict between my accountability to the IMB and my accountability to the Word of God, I must be accountable to God according to my understanding of his Word and my conscience."

Despite this painful decision, the McCalls contend they have no anger.

"We are not mad at anyone," he said. "We still pray for and support our missionaries. ... God's task has not changed, but our place and opportunities for service have changed."

Fort Bragg conference for pastors raises questions for Army

By Steve DeVane

Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com

April 15, 2003

Volume: 03-35-3537

FORT BRAGG, N.C. (ABP) -- Army officials have decided that a controversial meeting of pastors planned at Fort Bragg doesn't violate military guidelines.

The gathering April 22-23 is intended to help pastors learn evangelism lessons from military strategy, according to its organizer, Bobby Welch, a former Green Beret and pastor of First Baptist Church in Daytona Beach, Fla. The event is part of training for pastors in the FAITH evangelism program.

But a watchdog group tried to get the event cancelled, saying it violates the separation of church and state.

Carol Darby, a spokesperson for Army Special Operations Command, said Army lawyers looked into the gathering and decided that it met Department of Defense directives and Army regulations. "The request does fall under a program called 'Community Relations,'" she said. About four or five groups tour Army Special Operations Command under the program each year, Darby said.

While the meeting apparently will go on, it's unclear if it will live up to its original billing.

Welch reportedly told pastors in a letter that the event is a "once in a lifetime opportunity to join a group of warriors" at Fort Bragg. Welch is a friend of Maj. Gen. William Boykin, commander of the Army's John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School at Fort Bragg.

"You can be absolutely guaranteed you will never, ever have this type of opportunity again!" Welch wrote. "You will go with General Boykin and Green Beret instructors to places where no civilians and few soldiers ever go."

Pastors were told they would see a Special Forces demonstration of "today's war fighting weapons" and a visit to the "Shoot House" to learn how "Special Forces attack the enemy inside buildings."

Darby said the pastors will have access similar to that granted to other civic groups. The group will watch some training and hear briefings about Special Operations capabilities, she said.

In a telephone interview, Welch said he doesn't back down from his earlier descriptions. "We will see some things the average citizen doesn't see, simply because the average citizen doesn't go through the trouble to ask and go out there," he said. Welch said he doesn't know of any "major changes" to the program.

Army officials added a presentation by the unit's chaplain to the program because they thought it might interest the pastors, Darby said. Such changes are often made in the program depending on the age and interest of the group, she said.

Welch's letter reportedly said the event would include a speech by Boykin and informal time with the general. Darby said Boykin likely will only meet and welcome the group to Fort Bragg. Welch said the general's interaction with the group was always subject to his availability.

Welch also indicated in his letter to pastors that they would spend the night on post. Darby said they will stay in a hotel off post at their own expense.

Articles about the controversial event have appeared in the Raleigh News and Observer and New York Times.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State raised questions about Boykin's endorsement of the program and the use of military facilities and personnel for the event. The group wrote a letter of protest to Army Secretary Thomas White calling for the event to be cancelled.

"This is a clear violation of the separation of church and state," said Americans United executive director Barry Lynn. "Our military has no business using its resources to aid evangelism. It is especially outrageous to hold this kind of event at a time when America's relationship with Muslim countries is strained. This sends exactly the wrong signal at the wrong time."

Welch took issue with the Americans United statement regarding Muslims. "What did that have to do with anything?" he asked. Welch said Lynn's group had made "uneducated, uninformed and outright ignorant statements" and wrongly believed that his group was going to Fort Bragg for a revival.

Joseph Conn, a spokesman for Americans United, said Welch's promotional materials made it "pretty clear" that Welch was using military facilities and personnel to recruit people into an evangelism program.

"We don't have a problem with evangelism and spreading the gospel," Conn said. "We have a problem with government stepping in and helping do that. We're not in any way opposed to his program. We just believe it should be supported by the voluntary contributions of the faithful and not the government."

Welch said he thinks Americans United is trying to promote its own agenda. "It's really a shame," he said. "They didn't have the professional courtesy, to say nothing of the professional integrity, to give me a call."

Conn said Americans United is basing its objections on Welch's promotional material. "To tell you the truth, our quarrel is not with Pastor Welch, it's with the government," he said.

Welch said the event is designed to glean evangelism lessons from military strategy. He said he doesn't understand why Americans United is trying to "discriminate" against his group. He said he thinks Americans United owes his group and the Army an apology.

"I'm afraid we can't help him there," Conn said. "I don't think Pastor Welch would be nearly as excited if it was Rev. Sun Myung Moon and 50 Moon pastors getting the VIP treatment at Fort Bragg."

Welch, a Vietnam veteran and a former member of Special Forces, told a reporter that a similar session of 70 pastors was held at Fort Bragg last year at Boykin's invitation. Maj. Gary Kolb, another spokesperson for Army Special Operations Command at Fort Bragg, confirmed that a similar event was held last year. Boykin also spoke at a FAITH event in January.



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Defending church-state separation worth the risk, congressman says**By Ken Camp****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****April 15, 2003****Volume: 03-35-3538**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Defending the separation of church and state may be politically risky, but it's one of the single most important matters facing lawmakers, a veteran Texas congressman said.

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Waco, offered that assessment when he received the 2003 Associated Baptist Press Religious Freedom Award April 10 at the Freedom Forum in suburban Washington, D.C. The award is presented annually to a person the ABP board of directors cites as making significant contributions to the defense and advancement of religious liberty.

John Upton, executive director of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, accepted an ABP Founders Award that same evening for longstanding support offered to the independent news service.

Marv Knox, editor of Texas' Baptist Standard and chairman of the ABP board, praised Edwards as the "go-to-guy" on Capitol Hill regarding religious-liberty issues, no matter the political fallout.

Edwards responded that any political price paid by elected officials who defend the separation of church and state pales in comparison to the imprisonment and torture endured by Baptists in Virginia during the Revolutionary War era.

Edwards expressed appreciation to those who taught him the importance of church-state separation as an essential corollary to religious liberty. He cited specifically Herb Reynolds, former president of Baylor University, who introduced Edwards to a widely distributed sermon on religious liberty by George W. Truett, delivered from the steps of the U.S. Capitol in 1920.

Edwards also offered thanks to "heroes" of religious liberty such as Brent Walker and James Dunn of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and Derek Davis from the J.M. Dawson Institute on Church-State Studies at Baylor University.

"Why should it be difficult politically to fight for an ideal that is embedded in the first 16 words of the First Amendment?" Edwards asked.

The first reason some lawmakers find defense of church-state separation politically risky is that the concept is so greatly misunderstood, he suggested.

Edwards recalled one elderly constituent who told him that separation of church and state was in the Constitution of the Soviet Union, not the United States. He said he didn't have the heart to correct her publicly.

Legislators often fail to defend separation of church and state because they want to avoid being labeled as opponents of religion, he noted.

"The challenge we face is the same one faced in the days of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison. Elected officials fear being perceived as anti-religious," Edwards said.

During his last campaign, Edwards said, opponents mailed to his congressional district a half million brochures claiming he was opposed to children praying in school "even after Sept. 11." "I believe in school prayer, I just don't believe in government-sanctioned, government-ordered school prayer," Edwards explained.

Another reason elected officials sometimes shy away from church-state separation is that "we live in a day of eight-second sound bites and 30-second commercials," he said.

Televised attack ads distorting the records of some elected officials have silenced the voices of some who might

otherwise have defended church-state separation, he suggested. Lawmakers fear being labeled as opposing prayer or the Ten Commandments, he noted.

Edwards recalled one instance when that fear worked to his advantage. A bill was proposed mandating the display of the Ten Commandments in public buildings. Edwards had aides photocopy every page from the Bible. He threatened to bring to the floor a bill calling for the display of each page, daring any lawmaker to choose which pages were worthy of display and which were not. He made his point and the original bill died.

"I think congressmen should live by the Ten Commandments more and preach about them less from the floor of the Capitol," he said.

Edwards, who described himself as a "Texas Aggie Methodist" and the husband of a Baptist preacher's daughter, called on the faith community to make its voice heard in opposing the Bush administration's faith-based initiatives.

"It is critical that people of deep faith speak the loudest to beat back attempts to funnel federal funds – and with them all the attendant federal regulations – into houses of worship and to subsidize direct religious discrimination," Edwards said.



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Baptist World Alliance postpones youth conference due to SARS**By Rob Marus****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****April 15, 2003****Volume: 03-35-3539**

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) -- Due to worldwide fears of the spread of a mysterious and deadly respiratory illness in Asia, the Baptist World Alliance has postponed a youth conference it had scheduled for Hong Kong this summer.

The Virginia-based organization announced April 14 that it was postponing the 14th Baptist World Youth Conference until August 4-8, 2004. The meeting had originally been scheduled for July 16-20 at the Hong Kong Convention Center.

The conference is designed to bring together youth from many of the 200-plus national Baptist denominational groups affiliated with BWA. But Emmett Dunn, BWA youth department director, said fears over the rapid spread of SARS -- Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome -- caused the delay. The flu-like disease has killed more than 150 people worldwide but has been particularly harsh in Hong Kong and other parts of Southeast Asia.

Dunn said BWA's travel agents, the hotel and the convention center have agreed to keep rates at the same level for next year, and he would ask those already registered to choose to keep their places. However, he said, if registrants who have already paid their deposits for this year's conference want to pull out, they will be refunded their registration fees.

Those who have made direct arrangements with airlines or travel agencies not affiliated with BWA should check with those providers to see if they can be refunded, Dunn said.

"Everything we had planned for this meeting will be there next year, and even more," Dunn said. "We know that God works everything for good to those who trust him and we expect he has even greater plans for the conference next year."



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News briefs from ABP's Washington Bureau
By Robert Marus
Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com
April 15, 2003
Volume: 03-35-3540

Religious-freedom commission urges strong stance on Sudan

WASHINGTON – A U.S. government religious-freedom watchdog group is urging federal officials to oppose moves in the United Nations Human Rights Commission to ease up on Sudan.

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom sent a letter to Secretary of State Colin Powell urging the United States to fight against efforts "to abandon ongoing scrutiny of continuing serious violations of human rights in Sudan," according to a release from the group.

Commissioners are also urging Powell to oppose moves by the U.N. commission's current chair, Libya, to gain control over the appointment of a special U.N. representative on human rights violations in Sudan, Libya's neighbor.

The U.N. commission, meeting in Geneva, is considering a proposal that if passed would upgrade Sudan's status on human-rights issues in the eyes of the U.N.

But the U.S. State Department's most recent report on human rights says Sudan's official government continues to perpetrate gross human-rights violations against minority religious groups opposed to the Muslim-dominated government – despite a cease-fire between government and rebel forces. In addition, a congressional finding determined that Sudan's government was guilty of genocide.

"The United States must deliver a strong statement on Sudan so that there will be no doubt as to our position regarding ongoing scrutiny of continuing violations," said USCIRF Chair Felice Gaer. (ABP)

Pentagon Muslims oppose Franklin Graham visit

ARLINGTON, Va. – Muslim employees at the Pentagon, as well as others, are opposing a scheduled Good Friday appearance by Christian evangelist Franklin Graham. Graham has come under fire for several statements he has made since Sept. 11, 2001, that have been interpreted as anti-Islamic.

In a letter, Muslim workers asked the Pentagon chaplain's office to find "a more inclusive and honorable Christian clergyman" to speak at the service.

Graham is scheduled to give prayers at the service on April 18. According to the Washington Post, a spokesperson for the chaplain's office said April 14 that Christian employees had requested Graham, and they would be happy to accommodate Muslim employees with a Muslim cleric for services on Muslim holidays. However, the spokesperson said, the office had no plans to cancel Graham's appearance.

In one of several controversial statements since the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks, Graham called Islam "a very evil and wicked religion" in a nationally televised appearance. (ABP)

Bush asked to sign proclamation on reason

WASHINGTON – Several groups are asking President Bush to proclaim a "National Day of Reason" as an act of fairness to Americans who do not hold theistic religious beliefs.

A coalition of atheist, agnostic and church-state separationist groups have sent Bush a letter asking him to designate May 1 as a day "to honor our nation's historic commitment to the application of reason as the best means of resolving the many challenges facing humanity – whether economic, military, environmental or social."

May 1 is also the National Day of Prayer, a designation given by Congress in 1952 to the first Thursday in May. Christian and Jewish prayers and clergy traditionally dominate events marking the day. Last year's event included a prayer by then-U.S. Senate Chaplain Lloyd John Ogilvie that pledged the nation to be faithful to God as "sovereign of our land and as our personal Lord and savior."

The groups said the sentiments embodied by the National Day of Prayer "are insulting and demeaning to the estimated 30 million Americans who are non-religious, as well as to those of traditional religions who value the separation of church and state."

Bush's office has not said if they will honor the request. (ABP)



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