

-- set up formal theological dialogues between the groups on "matters of ministry, ordinances/sacraments, theology and polity throughout the life of the church";

-- call on UCC, Disciples and Alliance leaders to make joint statements "on issues of national and international concern";

-- create more formal cooperation between the three denominations in development of resources such as Sunday school curricula and development of youth camping events; and

-- set up a "Partnership Council" with representatives from all three groups to "facilitate and encourage growth" of the ecumenical alignment.

The agreement also calls upon Alliance congregations and individuals to continue and expand their local cooperative efforts with UCC and Disciples churches, and for moderate Baptist seminaries to offer courses on UCC and Disciples history and polity.

Both groups come from backgrounds similar to the Baptist tradition. The United Church of Christ, which has many local churches whose names include the titles "Congregational" or "Reformed," has a democratic church-government style similar to the Baptist tradition, which emphasizes local-church autonomy. Likewise, the Disciples of Christ come from a movement among U.S. evangelicals in the early 1800s that emphasized congregational church government and adult conversion.

Baptist groups historically have been leery of ecumenism, but the Alliance is generally considered to be the most "liberal" Baptist group in the U.S. Likewise, the UCC is widely considered the most progressive Protestant denominational group in the country, and the largest to officially endorse ordination for non-celibate gays and lesbians. The Alliance has endorsed full inclusion of homosexuals in the life of the denomination, but leaves its member churches free to decide how inclusive they will be of gays on the local level.

Hastey said he anticipated that UCC and Disciples members would approve the agreement in their meetings.

In addition to the partnership arrangement, delegates to the Alliance meeting updated a statement on Jewish-Christian relations the group first passed at their 1995 annual meeting, and adopted a statement on Muslim-Christian relations.

Both statements said the Alliance would "renounce interpretations of Scripture which foster religious stereotyping and prejudice against" adherents of each faith. The statement on Jewish relations confessed Baptists' past complicity in anti-Semitism and affirmed "the teaching of the Christian Scriptures that God has not rejected the community of Israel, God's covenant people."

The Muslim-relations statement recognized the common historical roots between Christianity, Islam and Judaism, sought dialogue with Muslims "built on mutual respect and the integrity of each other's faith," and committed the Alliance to work for "full religious freedom" and "equality of citizenship for all persons in all societies, whether Muslims or Christians or others, whether in the U.S. or elsewhere."

Hastey said the statement grew out of conversations that Alliance leaders had with the Islamic Circle of North America beginning last summer. That dialogue was an attempt at damage control in response to comments by former Southern Baptist Convention president Jerry Vines, who accused Islam's highest prophet, Muhammad, of being a "demon-possessed pedophile."

In his speech to Alliance members, Hastey said he "publicly repudiated the vile comments of a former president of the Southern Baptist

Convention" which, he told Islamic Circle representatives, "demean you and disgrace us."

Alliance delegates also passed a resolution condemning the U.S.'s 40-year-old trade and tourism embargo against Cuba, saying it had "caused untold hardships on the Cuban people." The resolution commended U.S. Rep. Jeff Flake (R-Ariz.) and U.S. Sen. Max Baucus (D-Mont.) for attempting to pass legislation that would ease the embargoes. The Alliance has had a missions partnership with the Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba for several years.

In other business, Alliance members re-elected Craig Henry, an attorney and member of Northminster Church in Monroe, La., as president. They elected Shanta Premawardhana, pastor of Chicago's Ellis Avenue Church, as vice president; and Mary Sue Brookshire, a student at Candler School of Theology at Emory University in Atlanta and a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., as secretary.

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House rejects voucher attempt
but proposals continue in states

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In the first congressional floor vote on private-school voucher programs since the Supreme Court declared them legal last year, members of the House of Representatives decisively turned down two attempts at adding voucher proposals to a federal education bill. But controversy still looms around the issue, and Colorado recently became the first state since the Court's ruling to enact a voucher program.

In reauthorizing the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), House members rejected attempts by two lawmakers to add voucher proposals to the bill April 30. Congressmen first voted down a voucher amendment offered by Rep. Jim DeMint (R-S.C.) that would have allowed parents of disabled children to receive government funding to pay for tuition at private schools, including religious schools. The amendment would have allowed such schools to discriminate on the basis of religion, gender or disability in admission of students. It failed by a vote of 240-182.

Then representatives voted down a similar amendment offered by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave (R-Colo.). It would have transferred federal funds to private schools that offered disabled-learning programs. It failed on a vote of 246-176.

"Contrary to what people claim, vouchers do not increase parents' choice," said Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.) in opposing DeMint's amendment. "Private schools can and do discriminate for a variety of reasons. They can refuse to take a student for any reason, including the student's disability. So when it comes to vouchers, it is not the parents who have the choice; it is the private school. Whatever choices a private school makes, it does not have to let parents or the public know why."

But Rep. John Boehner (R-Ohio), chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, wanted to emphasize the idea of "school choice" provided in the amendment rather than calling it a "voucher" proposal. "The amendment does not, as has been claimed by some critics, provide vouchers," Boehner said. "It simply affords states the flexibility they are seeking to provide individualized options for students with disabilities."

Rep. James Clyburn (D-S.C.) said Boehner's argument was Orwellian. "Yesterday, it was 'choice.' Today, it is 'options.' Tomorrow, there is

no telling what we will call it. But by whatever name we may call it, however we may cloak it, this is about vouchers," Clyburn said.

But despite recent defeats for vouchers proposals in legislatures and at the polls, voucher proposals are not dead. On April 16, Colorado Gov. Bill Owens signed a bill creating a program that provides \$5000 scholarships to students in underperforming state school districts. Students may spend the vouchers on tuition at private schools, including religious ones.

"Today we enact the most far-reaching parental choice program in America," Owens said at the time of the signing. "This is another step forward in our efforts to offer a quality education to every child in Colorado. Today, we empower thousands of Colorado families to choose the best school for their children."

Coloradans have twice rejected similar proposals. In statewide referenda in 1992 and 1998, voters defeated plans to create a voucher program. But the current bill was passed by the state's Republican-dominated legislature, and Owens is a long-time supporter of "school-choice" programs such as vouchers. Colorado becomes the fourth state to enact a voucher program on the state level.

Last June, the Supreme Court ruled that a Cleveland program providing vouchers to students in private and parochial schools did not violate the First Amendment's bar on government support for religion. The controversial decision was settled by a vote of 5-4.

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U.S. Baptist groups
sending relief to Iraq

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A crew of Southern Baptist volunteers from the United States will soon bring the gift of pure water to Iraq, and other Baptist groups are providing relief and redevelopment help to the war-ravaged Iraqi people.

A nine-man team of volunteers from several states will assemble water purification units and train Iraqis how to use them. Five water purification units, provided through Southern Baptist gifts, already have been crated and shipped to the region by volunteers in the Houston area. Another five units are scheduled for shipment in the immediate future.

"We will be in southern Iraq working in remote areas away from the cities," said Dick Talley of Dallas, logistics coordinator for Texas Baptist Men. "We'll be purifying water in rural areas along the Euphrates River."

Meanwhile, Southern Baptists are continuing to collect food boxes for needy families in Iraq. For less than \$60, a church can fill a box with 70 pounds of dry food that will feed an Iraqi family of five for about a month, according to representatives of the Southern Baptist International Mission Board.

Other Baptist groups are also providing aid. Baptist World Aid, the relief and development arm of the Baptist World Alliance, has provided \$5,000 to the Jordan Baptist Convention for relief work among Iraqi refugees, and it has given an additional \$5,000 grant to a network of Middle Eastern churches providing relief.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship is exploring a partnership with the Jordanian Evangelical Committee for Relief and Development, and plans to work among the Kurdish people of northern Iraq once the U.S. military

grants clearance.

"We have not placed volunteers yet but plan to look for appropriate ways for them to be engaged, such as training medical staff at several Iraqi universities," said David Harding, CBF coordinator for emergency response.

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