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Evangelical, other Christian leaders challenge Bush on 'compassion' agenda

By Robert Marus

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WASHINGTON (ABP) – A group of Christian leaders – including some of the most prominent supporters of President Bush's "faith-based initiative" – is expressing frustration with Bush's record on issues of economic justice for the poor.

"I am within a hair's breadth of concluding that the faith-based initiative is a cynical cover for ignoring the poor," said Evangelicals for Social Action President Ron Sider in a June 12 interview. Sider was echoing comments he made in a meeting with White House domestic-policy officials June 9. "I don't want to reach that conclusion," he continued. "I think in some important way, this president does genuinely care about the poor, but that's got to be demonstrated in funding for effective programs.

Sider as well as other evangelical, mainline Protestant and Catholic leaders under the auspices of the Christian anti-poverty group Call to Renewal, concluded a week of prayer meetings, press events and lobbying visits with administration and congressional officials in Washington June 12. The meetings were intended to promote more of a focus on programs that assist in poverty reduction and less on tax cuts.

They came in the midst of wrangling in Congress over provisions of Bush's \$350 billion-plus tax-cut bill. In May, shortly before the passage of the bill's Senate version, Republican leaders cut from it a per-child tax credit that would have benefited the lowest-income families.

When Democrats raised a stink about the omission, the chamber quickly passed another bill extending the credits to low-income people. But such a bill may get bogged down in the House, where Republican leaders have tied the child tax-credit bill to \$82 billion more in tax cuts – most of which would benefit wealthy taxpayers.

"When money is being diverted to war and homeland security plus a big tax cut, there is little left for poor people," Call to Renewal head Jim Wallis said to reporters after meeting with congressional leaders on June 10.

Wallis and 34 other Christian leaders signed a June 9 letter sent to Bush outlining their concerns regarding faith-based and other groups that provide social services to the poor, saying the tax bill was just one symptom of an overall attitude that doesn't prioritize poverty alleviation. "Mr. President, the 'good people' who provide such services are feeling overwhelmed by increasing need and diminishing resources," the letter read. "And many are feeling betrayed. The lack of a consistent, coherent and integrated domestic policy that benefits low-income people makes our continued support for your faith-based initiative increasingly untenable."

Baptist leaders who signed the document included American Baptist Churches General Secretary Roy Medley, ABC President David Hunt, and Baptist sociologist and popular speaker Tony Campolo.

Sider, Wallis and many of the other leaders who signed the letter were among the earliest supporters of Bush's faith-based proposal – the centerpiece of which would expand government's ability to give grants to churches and other religious organizations to perform social service work. The initiative has met with major legislative opposition because of church-state and employment-discrimination concerns, but Bush has implemented much of it by administrative action and executive order. White House officials portrayed it as the centerpiece of what they regularly referred to as Bush's "compassion agenda."

Bush officials have regularly said that religious social-service organizations need to be on equal footing with private secular and government groups in receipt of funds for doing social-service work.

In the June 10 press briefing, Wallis told reporters his organization and others had lived up to their end of the bargain with government, but didn't feel like Bush was reciprocating adequately on poverty issues. "The president has said that the faith and community leaders need to be at the table when social policy is talked about, and we haven't been," Wallis said. "We're [only] at the table when faith-based initiatives are talked about."

Wallis also described the initiative part of a "bargain" that government should make with the poor to better serve their needs. "This government is not living up to its side of the bargain," he told reporters. "The Bush administration is the one that's breaking faith with the faith-based initiative."

Wallis, Sider and the other leaders cited Bush's two large tax cuts and corresponding deficits and cuts in social-service programs as examples of how Bush was short-changing the poor.

Bart Campolo, son of Tony Campolo and director of the youth mission program Mission Year, said that in talking with administration officials and their congressional allies, it seemed poverty reduction was not their paramount concern in formulating social policy. "Couldn't we agree that the goal of all these things is to overcome or eradicate poverty? As we listen to people talk, their goal does not seem to be to eliminate poverty," Campolo said. "It's to get people off welfare."

Referencing Bush's rhetoric about opening government funds to religious social-service agencies so they can be "full partners," Campolo continued, "We're getting to be 'full partners' in distributing almost nothing."

Carole Shinnick, a Catholic nun who is executive director of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, said the Bush administration's record on these issues has confirmed her suspicions. "From the get-go, we have been much more skeptical about the faith-based initiative of the administration," she said. "We're starting to think, in fact, it was a disguise for passing on to existing organizations the responsibility that belongs to government."

Sider said such a philosophy of social-service work would be a mistake. "I've been saying from the beginning that if anybody thinks that because of the faith-based initiative that the churches and other religious institutions can take over the government's responsibility for poverty programs, that's both pragmatically nonsense and theologically wrong," he said.

The administration understands these leaders' concerns, said Jim Towey, director of the White House Office of Faith-Based and Community Initiatives and one of the administration officials who met with the group. In a June 12 phone interview, he defended Bush's record on poverty issues and said the White House and the leaders merely had differences on how best to go about eradicating poverty. "I have a lot of respect for Jim [Wallis] and Ron [Sider]; I don't have a critical word to say about either one of them," Towey said. "I think the president has been trying to bring new resources to the table; the question is, 'What is the most effective way of doing it?' You look at government spending, but you also look at effective use of resources."

Towey said, Bush's policies ultimately will help the poor by creating jobs as well as providing more effective social services. "When I go to homeless shelters, drug treatment programs in America, or prisons with inmates about to get out, one of their top concerns is I need to find a job," he said. "And the president believes the tax cuts will stimulate the economy and job growth. This ultimately will help the poor."

Towey said the fact that some of the White House's top domestic-policy advisors met with the group shows Bush's willingness to hear them on domestic policy, despite Wallis' contention. "We feel like the dialogue is good," he said.

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Judicial nominee's record disturbing, church-state watchdog groups say**By Robert Marus****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****June 12, 2003****Volume: 03-53-3640**

WASHINGTON (ABP) – In the latest flare-up between the White House and civil-rights groups, several church-state watchdog groups are among those opposing the latest nominee that President Bush has proposed for a high-level federal judgeship.

The Interfaith Alliance and Americans United for Separation of Church and State are among those opposing the nomination of Alabama Attorney General William Pryor to a position on the Atlanta-based 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

"The White House's nomination of Mr. Pryor for the 11th Circuit Court of Appeals is a critically flawed nomination," wrote Interfaith Alliance President Welton Gaddy, who is also a Baptist minister, in a June 11 letter to members of the Senate Judiciary Committee. "I urge you to reject this nominee unless you find convincing evidence that Mr. Pryor has come to respect religious pluralism in this nation and has changed his mind about the importance of defending constitutionally guaranteed religious liberty for all of the citizens of this nation." Spokesmen for the Interfaith Alliance and Americans United pointed out several examples of Pryor's record on church-state issues that they said were troubling. The most serious charges involved Pryor's defense of Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, who erected a monument to the Ten Commandments in the rotunda of the state judicial building and was successfully sued for violating the First Amendment's prohibition on government establishment of religion. Moore currently is appealing a ruling against him in federal court – and his case is before the panel to which Pryor has been nominated.

Speaking before a 1997 rally in favor of Moore's Ten Commandments campaign, Pryor reportedly said, "God has chosen through his son Jesus Christ this time, this place for all Christians – Protestants, Catholics and Orthodox – to save our country and save our courts."

In a lengthy Senate Judiciary Committee hearing June 11, senators repeatedly asked him about his past statements and actions on church-state issues, especially a quotation from a 1997 speech at a Catholic high school in Mobile where he said, "The American experiment is not a theocracy and does not establish an official religion, but the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution of the United States are rooted in a Christian perspective of the nature of government and the nature of man. The challenge of the next millennium will be to preserve the American experiment by restoring its Christian perspective."

Pryor, who is Catholic, repeatedly argued his record proved that as attorney general he routinely enforced laws and court decisions with which he personally disagreed. He also argued that his record proved he could defend the religious freedom of those who are not Christians.

In response to a question where Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) said Pryor had described the United States as "a Christian nation" in previous speeches, Pryor objected. "I have never used the term 'Christian nation,'" he said. "Every individual enjoys human rights without regard to what the majority wants."

Pryor also argued his legal defense of Moore was on "much less expansive" constitutional grounds than both Moore and Alabama's governor wanted him to argue the case.

Judiciary Committee Chairman Sen. Orrin Hatch (R-Utah) said he believed Pryor was a victim of "religious profiling" because of his views on church-state issues as well as abortion. Hatch also said the case against Pryor consisted of "half-truths" that have been "perpetuated by the usual liberal interest groups who will stop at nothing to defeat President Bush's judicial nominees."

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BGCT calls churches to “come home” to city cores**By John Hall****Associated Baptist Press - www.abpnews.com****June 12, 2003****Volume: 03-53-3641**

DALLAS (ABP) – The Baptist General Convention of Texas is calling Christians to transform city cores—diverse, largely unchurched areas in the heart of urban areas—by “coming back home” through a new project.

The BGCT Church Missions and Evangelism section recently launched the Texas City Core Initiative, an effort to develop strategies and models that enable spiritual, social and economic transformation in urban areas abandoned by many traditional Baptist churches.

These areas have transitioned several times to become a hodgepodge of cultures, lifestyles, ethnicities and income levels, according to E.B. Brooks, director of the BGCT Church Missions and Evangelism section. In many cases, high-priced loft apartments sit blocks from crime-ridden neighborhoods. Different cultures continuously engage each other.

“People from our churches drive into the inner city to work, but they see freeways, not neighborhoods,” Brooks said. “They miss places where crime, poverty and hopelessness exhibit themselves. They also miss the places where regentrification is happening and where people are moving back to the city core.”

Though people think large cities—Dallas, Houston, San Antonio and Austin—have large unchurched areas in city cores, Brooks said many Texas towns similarly are affected.

Census demographic statistics indicate 50 Texas cities have more than 50,000 people, including Port Arthur, McAllen, Killeen and Amarillo. Twenty-three of those cities have more than 100,000 people. All 50 have a city core, according to Brooks.

Statistics indicate an influx of people into these “inner city” regions, Brooks noticed. Though people surged into the area, few traditional churches minister to them because many relocated to the suburbs in conjunction with the “white flight” and regional industrialization of the 1940s and 50s.

Brooks is looking to change that phenomenon by calling “the churches back home” to impact the communities. In addition to raising interest in city core development, Brooks hopes to harness the outreaches of house and organic churches that can rapidly multiply in the area.

“The need and opportunity is mind-boggling, but we need to understand God is not threatened by the need or the opportunity, and everything we accomplish will reduce the overwhelming need,” he said.

“I do believe that we have tremendous untouched resources in the churches of Texas to do this task. I believe our people will be challenged by it.”

While the challenge is great, the initiative is not starting from scratch, organizers reminded. Project leaders hope to network existing ministries cross-denominationally and facilitate new ministries to fill needs.

“We’re not starting from ground zero. We think of all the problems that are present in the city core. For every problem there is a Christian response,” said Tommy Goode, who has been contracted to help with the project.

“The timing of this is remarkable in that there are so many things going that make the Texas City Core Initiative fit in with the work of Baptists and other Evangelicals.”

Meeting urgent needs is only the beginning of the project. Leaders want ministries to provide job skills and family support as well as spiritual support.

Gospel brunches serve spirituality to unchurched of Austin

By John Hall

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AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) — Gospel brunches are serving a steady diet of fellowship and “roots” gospel in packed restaurants and clubs around the city of Austin, Texas.

Non-Christians are flocking to eating establishments on Sunday mornings to enjoy good food, conversation and traditional gospel music in five locales that regularly hold gospel brunches.

The brunches benefit business owners and Christians. Owners profit from people who pay for the meal, and believers usually book the bands and set up the events, said Greg Adkins, project director of the Gospel According to Austin.

Organizers tried several genres of music, including contemporary Christian, to bring people in before discovering a great demand for “roots” music — gospel with jazz, bluegrass, blues and country elements.

The combination of home-style cooking, relaxed conversation and traditional music harkens back to a simpler time and lifestyle, Adkins believes. The brunches are energetic, secure and uplifting, feelings nonbelievers rarely find, he said.

Many of the people who come to the events say they have been burned by the church, found Christians hypocritical or have no desire in the faith, but they are drawn to the music, which Adkins called “artistically cool.”

Diners listen to band members’ testimonies because they are a non-threatening part of the performance, Adkins said. The music and band mates speak on a level that nonbelievers understand without intimidating them.

“They don’t want to be preached to,” Adkins commented. “They don’t want to be judged.”

Despite their unwillingness to enter a church, brunch-goers are interested in spiritual matters, Adkins said. He encourages spiritual thought through the use of double entendres and language common to the venue, such as “kick butt gospel.”

“They’re open to the spirit of God,” he said. “They love to feel the spirit.”

While people have told Adkins the brunches serve as their church service, he freely admits the events do not take the place of church. He believes the efforts are an outreach avenue in a town where 87 percent of the people do not claim to attend church regularly and are turned off by invitations to do so.

“They are closed off to church and to me as a church person,” he said.

Brunches have gained wild popularity across the country, and Adkins has noticed interest from European businesses.

Bea Marshall, who traveled from England to attend her first gospel brunch as part of the wabiSABI Conference, a conference on the emerging church, was unsure of how successful brunches would be in her largely non-Christian country. The English would be interested in the music, but she was unsure whether the gospel aspect would turn them off.

But she thought the efforts were a wonderful idea and volunteered to bring a gospel band to a coffee shop she hopes to open with her husband.

“It’s pretty awesome really,” Marshall said. “It’s amazing. It’s brilliant. And to combine it with food is a great idea.”

Adkins said he would like to see churches get involved behind the scenes of these ventures, noting the events are meant to sow the seeds of the faith in nonbelievers’ hearts, not for believers’ enjoyment. If Christians became overtly involved, nonbelievers would be intimidated and the brunches “would be crushed,” he fears.

“There’s all these doors that are open if the church would catch the vision,” he said.



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CBF commissions 25 for summer missions
By Lance Wallace
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RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) – The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship recently commissioned 25 graduate and undergraduate students for service through the Fellowship's Student.Go summer missions program.

The commissioning service, held at First Baptist Church of Raleigh, followed three days of intensive training and orientation for the students who will be serving in locations ranging from Atlanta to northern Africa.

Student.Go is a joint venture of the Fellowship's Global Missions initiative and Passport Inc., a Birmingham, Ala.,-based youth camp experience that blends hands-on mission projects with traditional summer retreats. Student.Go provides summer and semester missions opportunities for both undergraduate and graduate students to serve alongside Fellowship field personnel and ministry partners in locations around the globe.

"The positions include a wide variety of locations and types of ministry, including creative, innovative assignments, requiring specific skill sets as well as more traditional ministry options," said Amy Derrick, the Fellowship's coordinator for Student.Go. "The students not only gain hands-on ministry experience, but also provide invaluable assistance to the ministries with which they work."

The 25 students who were commissioned, their schools and their locations of service are: Jennifer Adams, Baylor's Truett Seminary, Matthew House ministry for refugees in Ft. Erie, Canada; Bill Ballard, Wake Forest Divinity School, ethnographic interviewing of Afghans in Fremont, Calif.; Amanda Bordeaux, Meredith College, Touching Miami with Love ministry, Miami, Fla.; Julie Case, University of Mary Hardin Baylor, mission teams coordinator for the Partners in Hope, the Fellowship's rural poverty initiative in Helena, Ark.; Adam Cheney, George Mason University, children's and youth camps in Brooklyn, N.Y., in conjunction with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board; Kristen Connolly, Miami University of Ohio, Macedonia; Adam Dunsworth, North Carolina School of Arts, videography in northern Africa; Brian Eastland, Baylor University, children's and youth camps in Brooklyn, N.Y.; Monica Garris, Campbell University Divinity School, children's program manager in Raleigh, N.C.; Jessy Grondin, Samford University, ethnographic interviewing of Afghans in Fremont, Calif.; Jennifer Harris, Southwest Baptist University, ethnographic interviewing of Afghans in Fremont, Calif.; Emily Hogge, University of Virginia, mission teams coordinator with Buckner Children and Family Services in Harlingen, Texas; Robbie Hott, William & Mary University, missions and media technology support in Houston, Texas; Deanna Lavery, Mary Washington College, Touching Miami with Love ministry in Miami, Fla.; Marjorie Patterson, Virginia Commonwealth University, Matthew House ministry for refugees in Ft. Erie, Canada, in conjunction with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board; Beth Riddick, Campbell University Divinity School, medical team in Angola, Africa; Christen Roszkowski, Campbellsville University, Touching Miami with Love ministry in Miami, Fla., in conjunction with Kentucky Baptist Fellowship; Jo Ann Sharkey, Baylor's Truett Seminary, Somali refugees in Toronto, Canada; Ashley Skiles, University of Mary Hardin Baylor, Touching Miami with Love ministry in Miami, Fla.; Sarah Slagle, Virginia Tech, ethnographic interviewing of Afghans in Fremont, Calif.; Holly and Matt Sprink, Baylor's Truett Seminary, oral history preservation of marginalized people and a mentor ministry; Sarah Stone, Shorter College, children's home in northern Africa; Sarah Thompson, University of Richmond, children's and youth camps in Brooklyn, N.Y., in conjunction with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board; Bethany Warren, University of Virginia, children's and youth camps in Brooklyn, N.Y., in conjunction with the Virginia Baptist Mission Board; and Christina Wright, Northern Kentucky University, Quest Farms in Kentucky, in conjunction with Kentucky Baptist Fellowship

In addition to the 25 students who attended Student.Go orientation, there are four students serving through Student.Go this summer at Sowing Seeds of Hope in Perry County, Ala. They attended a special orientation in mid May. They are Jeannette Jordan of Mercer's McAfee School of Theology, Amy Pennington of Auburn University and Erica Jordan and Natalie McIntyre, both of Samford University.

Another four students served Student.Go in the spring. They are Mandy Ransone, Longwood University, teaching English in northern Africa; Richard Grant, Baylor University, research and community development with Partners in Hope rural poverty initiative in Arkansas; Christy Craddock, Georgetown College, videography in northern Africa; and John C. of Stephen F. Austin University, information technology support in Asia. (John cannot be identified for security reasons.)

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Photo available:

The Student Go summer missionaries pause for a group picture during orientation in Raleigh, N.C. They are, from left, front row: Jessie Grondin, Sarah Slagle, Amanda Bordeaux, Matt Sprink, Holly Sprink, Kristen Connolly; middle row: Emily Hogge, Deanna Lavery, Bethany Warren, Christina Wright, Monica Garris, Jennifer Harris, Sarah Thompson, Ashley Skiles, Beth Riddick, Julie Case; and back row: JoAnn Sharkey, Jennifer Adams, Sarah Stone, Brian Eastland, Adam Cheney, Christen Roszkowski, Robbie Hott, Adam Dunsworth, Bill Ballard.



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