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**Random acts of kindness
not so random, study says**

By Hannah Lodwick

CHICAGO (ABP) -- Good deeds may not get you into heaven, but they are a pretty good indication of who is faithful among us, a recent study found.

Scientists at the National Opinion Research Center have determined that when it comes to inspiring altruism, nothing matters except faith -- not gender, race, social class, political affiliation or locale.

According to the study, "Altruism in Contemporary America," Americans on average do 109 altruistic acts each year. But those who attend a place of worship weekly -- church, synagogue mosque or temple - report doing an average of 128 good deeds a year. People who never attend perform only 96 acts of kindness on average.

In addition to those who attend, people who pray reportedly show more kindness than those who don't. The report said those who pray did three times as many acts of kindness as those who never pray.

Tom Smith, director of the two-year study, said one reason why faith-based acts of kindness proliferate is that the core values of all major world religions incorporate charity-related deeds in their beliefs.

"People who are actively engaged [in a religious community] help others," Smith said. "What made a difference was attending church and praying more often. If we're actively engaged, we're a part of a religious community, and opportunities to help others come up more often as a member of a congregation."

Smith said the research team began the study looking for predictors of altruistic acts, things like activity in social services, gender or rural values. The fact that faith supercedes other factors could involve what Smith called "opportunity structure."

"We expected people in rural areas to have higher values, be more altruistic, but that was not the case," Smith said. "If you live in a city, opportunities to do good deeds are more likely to turn up."

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For the first-of-its-kind report, Smith and his colleagues evaluated 1,366 people with a list of 15 "good deeds," asking them how often they performed the acts in the past week, month and year. The deeds included giving food or money to a homeless person, volunteering, giving directions to a stranger, offering a bus or train seat to someone standing, and helping someone find a job.

The most common good deed -- cited by 92.6 percent of respondents -- was spending time talking to someone who felt depressed.

The 15 good deeds studied are commonly used in similar surveys. Researchers shied away from deeds that involve rare occurrences -- saving someone from drowning, for example.

"We tried to pick things ... that weren't rare, things you would have the opportunity to do in daily life," Smith said.

While men and women were equally altruistic, women were much more likely to feel empathy than men. While 45 percent of women felt disturbed by others' misfortunes, only 25 percent of men reported the same. In fact, Smith said, gender made the only difference when it came to empathy.

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House amendments target Pledge, Commandments rulings

By Hannah Lodwick

WASHINGTON (ABP) --- The House of Representatives approved two amendments to a spending bill that are intended to protect the Ten Commandments and Pledge of Allegiance.

While the amendments were celebrated by sponsor Rep. John Hostettler (R-Ind.), other lawmakers predicted they will have no practical effect.

One of Hostettler's amendments prohibits U.S. Marshals from removing a two-ton monument of the Ten Commandments from the rotunda of the Alabama Supreme Court. The amendment passed 260-161.

The monument was placed in the courthouse by Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore. A federal judge later ordered the monument removed but delayed enforcement while Moore appeals the ruling to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Hostettler said he does not trust the Supreme Court to do the right thing.

"The framers of the Constitution never intended for the fickle sentiments of as few as five people in black robes, unelected and unaccountable to the people, to have the power to make such fundamental decisions for society," Hostettler said during House debate. "That power was crafted and reserved for the legislature. We do not have to put our faith in the faint possibility that some day five people in black robes will wake up and see that they have usurped the authority to legislate and will constrain themselves from straying from their constitutional boundaries."

House members also approved Hostettler's amendment to prohibit the use of federal funds to enforce a ruling by the 9th Circuit of Appeals that said California's school children can not say the Pledge of

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Allegiance because it includes the words "under God." The vote on the amendment passed 307-119.

Both amendments were part of the Commerce, Justice, State and Judiciary Spending Bill adopted July 23. To take effect, the amendments must be added to the Senate version of the bill and signed by President Bush.

Even then, the amendments won't carry the weight of law. While federal funds cannot be used to enforce the lower courts' rulings, legal scholars pointed out, the rulings are still in effect and can be enforced by local and state authorities.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said Hostettler's amendment supporting the Ten Commandments monument is unconstitutional.

"This is pure political grandstanding," he said. "Worse than that, it's an insult to the Constitution. Our country operates under the rule of law. Hostettler is promoting a form of anarchy."

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House passes Head Start bill allowing discrimination in hiring

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The House of Representatives has narrowly passed another routine spending bill with an added "charitable-choice" provision.

In a flurry of bills passed in the last week of legislative business before Congress' August recess, lawmakers July 24 passed the "School Readiness Act of 2003" on a 217-216 vote.

Among other controversial provisions, the bill contained a section that allowed pervasively religious groups to receive government funds for Head Start, a 38-year-old early-childhood-education program, but allowing them to retain the right to discriminate in hiring based on religion.

Although churches, mosques and other deeply religious organizations have the right to take religion into account in hiring decisions with their own money, most federal social-services grant programs outlaw funding organizations that practice religion-based hiring.

The House passed the bill after representatives rejected an amendment offered by Rep. Lynn Woolsey (D-Calif.) that would have stripped it of the employment-discrimination exemption. Woolsey's amendment failed on a 199-231 vote.

The bill is part of an ongoing effort by the White House and its ideological allies in Congress to expand government's ability to fund social services through churches and other pervasively religious providers. The plan is sometimes referred to as "charitable choice" or the "faith-based initiative."

In May, the House passed reauthorization of the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003, which included similar employment-discrimination exemptions for religious groups conducting federally funded job-training programs.

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Church-state separationist groups decried the Head Start bill, as they did the earlier legislation. "The House has just passed a terribly flawed bill," said Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, in a statement. "There is no justification for allowing employment discrimination in federally funded programs. This advances the Bush administration's 'faith-based' initiative at the expense of civil rights and civil liberties."

Lynn noted that many religious leaders -- including the Washington office of Bush's own United Methodist Church -- opposed the bill. But Bush has said such legislation is necessary to create a "level playing field" and prevent "discrimination" against religious providers in competition for federal social-service grants. Bush and his supporters have argued that requiring religious providers to conform to the employment standards of other groups unnecessarily forces them to compromise their religious mission in order to receive federal funding.

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Promise Keepers celebrate spiritual freedom in Louisville

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Approximately 12,000 men and boys gathered in Louisville, Ky., for a July 25-26 Promise Keepers rally -- the eighth of 18 weekend Promise Keeper events scheduled this year from New York to California.

Since its founding in 1990, Promise Keepers has hosted more than 150 events with a total attendance of more than 5 million men and boys.

"God has challenged Promise Keepers to raise up an army of men to win the lost," explained Harold Velasquez, Promise Keepers' administrator. With the influence of husbands and fathers in the home, "the potential is for multiple millions of souls to come into a saving relationship with Jesus Christ."

Velasquez said studies indicate that when a husband and father becomes a Christian, "93 percent of the time his family follows in that decision. ... You get Dad, you get the family. It's that simple."

More than 900 people responded to a Friday evening altar call to become Christians or rededicate their lives to God.

"We've got to take this to the world," urged conference emcee Reggie Dabbs. "We've got to let them know there's a different way to live."

Though the crowd at Louisville's Freedom Hall was significantly smaller than the 18,000 who attended a Promise Keepers rally in the city three years ago, event organizers said the individual spiritual impact is the primary goal.

"Our mission is still the same -- to see men transformed worldwide," explained True Nguyen, Promise Keepers' U.S. ministry director. "We want men to be challenged in a way that allows them to have a passion for seeing other men saved."

Absent from the weekend event was Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney, former University of

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Colorado head football coach.

"The reason he is not here is because this guy is the epitome of a Promise Keeper," Velasquez said. "His wife, Lyndi, has a very serious lung condition. ... Coach Mac has pulled back from everything to take a sabbatical to be where he needs to be with his wife right now."

The focus on evangelism continued throughout the two-day event as speakers highlighted personal repentance, long-term Christian commitment, building strong Christian homes, personal witnessing and global evangelism.

Speaker James Ryle, one of Promise Keepers' founding board members, warned that many men are locked in prisons of guilt, fear, shame, anger, lust or even religious legalism. Most non-Christians "don't have a problem with Jesus," he said. "They have a problem with us."

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