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Senate halts action on DC vouchers, but subject likely to come up again

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- For the time being, the Senate has halted a bill that would create a publicly funded school-voucher program in the District of Columbia.

Republican leaders withdrew the D.C. appropriations bill for fiscal year 2004, which included the voucher provision, from consideration Sept. 30. Although it had been debated in the Senate for several days, the bill's supporters reportedly were worried they didn't have enough votes to overcome a threatened Democratic filibuster.

A similar D.C. voucher provision has already passed the House on the thinnest of margins -- 209 to 208.

The bill would provide tax funding for scholarships that poor students could spend at any participating private school in the city -- including Catholic and other religious schools.

If passed, it would be the first federally funded voucher program in the country -- which opponents say would set a dangerous precedent. Congress rejected a nationwide voucher program last year.

Although the Supreme Court declared that a statewide voucher program in Ohio did not violate the Constitution's ban on government support for religion, church-state separationist groups still oppose vouchers, along with many public-education lobbying groups.

During debate in the Senate, Sen. Mike DeWine (R-Ohio), the bill's chief sponsor, told his colleagues across

the aisle that their opposition would do nothing to improve the status of the troubled Washington school system. "We are going to do something a little different, because we are not satisfied with the status quo, because we don't think what is currently going on in our nation's capital is good enough for the kids who live there," he said during floor debate on the voucher provision Sept. 29. "I say to my colleagues, if you are satisfied with the way things are in the District of Columbia, then take this out of the bill."

But voucher opponents said D.C. public schools are improving and that other education-reform models, such as public charter schools, are producing positive results in Washington.

The provision fell victim to the filibuster threats and the pressing nature of several other appropriations bills the Senate must consider soon -- including President Bush's \$87 billion request for aid in Iraq. The House has already passed all of its federal spending bills for the year, but the Senate has only passed about half. The federal government's fiscal year began Oct. 1.

Melody Webb, director of Stop D.C. Vouchers and the parent of two children in D.C. schools, expressed "cautious optimism" at the development. However, she told ABP, Republicans may attempt to add the voucher provision into an omnibus federal-spending package later in the month.

"We want people to be vigilant," Webb said Oct. 2. "We don't want to celebrate because we know how important this is to conservatives in Congress."

The D.C. voucher provision gained momentum earlier this year after Washington Mayor Anthony Williams and D.C. School Board President Peggy Cooper Cafritz announced they were changing their long-standing opposition to vouchers and supporting the bill. While their support was hailed by pro-voucher groups, voucher opponents noted that a solid majority of D.C.'s other elected officials remain opposed to vouchers.

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As revivals fade, evangelists must live off faith, leaders say

By John Hall

(ABP) -- As the popularity of revivals continues to wane, evangelists must hold out faith that God will provide, their leaders say.

In 25 years as a vocational evangelist, Rob Randall has witnessed a steady decline in the number of churches holding revivals. While it once was common for churches to hold two revivals a year, some congregations now have one every five years at best, Randall said. Countywide revivals are increasingly rare.

The number of Southern Baptist evangelists also is down. There are about 500 on the mailing list of the Conference of Southern Baptist Evangelists, down from more than 700, according to Benny Jackson, president of the group.

Consistent work is difficult to come by for an evangelist, and some have picked up part-time jobs or found other full-time positions to support their families, Randall said. Even when a revival opportunity comes along, the evangelist is at the mercy of a congregation's love offering for support.

"The evangelist ... has to live by faith," Randall said. "He doesn't have a regular check. He doesn't have a large support base usually. He is out there to sink or swim based on his own ability to raise money."

Some observers say the decline of revivals reflects a change in how churches view evangelism.

The paradigm has shifted from an event-oriented task to a continual process, suggested David Hughes, pastor of First Baptist Church in Winston Salem, N.C. Rather than holding revivals, his church participates in efforts such as Rick Warren's "40 Days of Purpose."

"We're in a different day," said Hughes, who has not held a revival in his 12-year tenure at his church. "The need for people being spiritually revived is constant. The way churches meet that is different because the world is different."

Rather than being the main attraction, revivals have become part of a multifaceted evangelism approach, according to Terry Hamrick, leadership development coordinator for the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Atlanta.

Revival meetings were best suited for a homogeneous "churched culture," he argued. In a postmodern world that is diverse and often not familiar with church life, several outreach methods must be applied. "We can no longer afford the luxury of a one-size-fits-all approach to evangelism," Hamrick said.

However, Randall is unconvinced any other event focuses the church like a revival.

"Practically speaking, the revival meeting is the only thing I've seen that puts all the energies of the church to win the community for Christ," the evangelist said. "Here's the dilemma: If someone will tell me the substitute, I'm for it. I've not heard it."

Many church leaders, especially younger ones, do not understand the role of evangelists and hold to preconceived notions, said Jon Moore, president of the Conference of Texas Baptist Evangelists.

Stereotypical images and well-publicized indiscretions also have hurt evangelists. "A lot of young men have heard the horror stories and do not know any evangelists, so they assume certain things," Moore said.

Smaller churches trying to copy the programs of megachurches has reduced the number of revivals, added Jackson, president of the SBC evangelists group. "They say the big church doesn't have revivals, [so] they must not work anymore," Jackson explained. "But what happens is they don't do anything."

In Randall's view, the effectiveness and purpose of revivals is not where churches take issue, but with the message. The straightforward presentation of the gospel is offensive to today's church, the evangelist said.

"The bottom line is we are in a time of convenience. We go to church when we want to. We don't go to church when we don't want to. The seeker-sensitive church is designed to be non-confrontational. We don't want to call people to repentance. We don't want to hurt people's feelings," he explained.

"Paul says the preaching of the gospel is an offense. If you are not offending people, I would wonder what you are preaching," Randall said.

David Hughes, the North Carolina pastor, agrees preaching the gospel from the pulpit is necessary, but a confrontational method of outreach turns off more nonbelievers than it attracts. A conversational style of evangelism is proving more effective with unchurched people, he says.

"Communication has changed. The way we communicate has changed," Hughes said. "What we respond to is different."

A successful revival effort must be bathed in prayer, publicized and allowed to work, Randall added, but the priority of convenience keeps that from happening. While revival meetings remain effective, they take a lot of energy that many congregations are not willing to give, he said. Whereas revivals used to run several weeks, they usually last a couple days now. That is not enough time for the evangelist to connect with the people or to allow God to work, he said.

"Our pews are full but full of people who do not want to give," Randall commented. "Our pews are full, but full of people not willing to commit. Our pews are full of people not willing to share their faith."

Hughes agreed that revivals have been cut back, but that's because individuals are "time poor," not because they are uncommitted. People are juggling many things in their lives and don't have time to attend a weeklong series of services.

The gospel message evangelists deliver is badly needed in churches, Randall argued. "There's a newness and a freshness to the evangelists' message," he said. "And the church needs to hear that."

The gospel is needed, Hughes agreed, but the way evangelists deliver it in the future may be different. He noted even Billy and Franklin Graham have altered their approach slightly, choosing not to call their efforts crusades and changing the music a bit.

All agree these are tough times for vocational evangelists. But as long as Jesus' message is called for, the evangelists say, they will be needed, and God will watch over them.

"I don't think there will be anything that will replace the man of the pulpit -- a real man to love the people," Jackson concluded.

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Edwards: New political action committee needed to defend church-state separation

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Christians who support the separation of church and state should step up their battle against forces that are eroding that principle, said Rep. Chet Edwards.

In an Oct. 1 speech to a group of Baptists, Edwards (D-Texas) called for Christians who believe that church-state separation is good for both democracy and religion to make their voices heard in the public sphere.

"I've never been more concerned about the principle of church-state separation," Edwards said.

He later suggested Christians who agree should form a political action committee to champion church-state separation and support candidates who do.

"If we don't ratchet up dramatically our efforts, we're going to lose this fight," he said.

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Edwards spoke at the conclusion of a two-day conference called "Reclaiming an Historic Baptist Principle: Separation of Church and State." The conference, sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies, brought about 140 Baptists from around the country to the nation's capital.

Edwards said the Religious Right is winning both legal and public-relations victories in its decades-old battle to erode the wall separating church and state. And the debate has become too polarized, he added, with much of the public thinking all Christians would naturally oppose church-state separation.

"We cannot afford the American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State to be the only voices heard in America" supporting strict separation, Edwards said, referring to two secular advocacy groups that have been on the legal and media front lines fighting church-state battles in recent years.

The recent legal battle that resulted in a Ten Commandments display being removed from an Alabama courthouse was a mixed blessing, Edwards said. "While we won an important legal victory in Alabama lately, it was a brutal public-relations defeat," he said.

Listing a host of congressional and judicial efforts in recent years that he claimed threaten the First Amendment's ban on government promotion of religion, Edwards said religious people need to speak up to change the perception that only "secularists" or people who are "anti-religion" support the principle of strict church-state separation.

Edwards -- whose congressional district includes President Bush's ranch outside Crawford, Texas -- said Bush and his congressional allies are behind much of the onslaught against religious liberty. While he believes Bush has sincerely good motivations in his efforts to provide government funding to religious schools and charities, Edwards said he believes Bush is sincerely wrong.

"On this issue of church-state separation, I just don't think he [Bush] gets it," Edwards said. "I don't think he understands the first 16 words of the First Amendment."

Those words are: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

Edwards also noted much of the long-term ability to affect church-state issues lies in the president's power to appoint judges to federal courts, including the Supreme Court. President Bush has cited the two members of that court who are most hostile to church-state separation as his model for judges -- justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Edwards said many of his colleagues in Congress tell him privately that they agree with him on important church-state issues but then do not vote with him. Sometimes it's due to ignorance on a particular issue, he said, but "it is an ignorance exacerbated by a fear ... that, as we are running for re-election, we will be perceived as anti-religion."

Because of all that, Edwards said, Christians who agree with him on church-state issues should form both grassroots organizations and think-tanks to combat the well-funded and well-organized effort on the other side.

He mentioned EMILY's List, a group that encourages its members to donate to the campaigns of progressive Democratic women running for public office. He suggested that "people of faith" who support church-state

separation could create a similar list to encourage donations to candidates who promise to support separation.

Asked by an ABP reporter if he was suggesting the formation of a political action committee, Edwards said he was.

"We could call it the 'Jefferson-Madison List,'" he said, referring to the fathers of the First Amendment's religious-liberty clauses.

Leaders of two conservative Christian lobbying groups scoffed at Edwards' proposal.

Bill Murray, media coordinator for the Family Research Council, cited public opinion polls he says support government funding of religious programs, "especially" Christian programs. "The public doesn't seem to be clamoring for more separation of church and state," he said.

"You have secularists out there -- apparently, who Congressman Edwards was also railing against -- who are trying to take God completely out of the public square," Murray said. "What we're trying to do is protect the freedom of expression that is guaranteed to all of us in the Constitution."

"I don't understand Congressman Edwards' complaint," added Jim Backlin, director of legislative affairs for Christian Coalition of America. "The liberals such as Chet Edwards have always had very liberal organizations such as the National Coalition [sic] of Churches. ... And there's no reason why pro-family and conservative Christians can't get behind conservative organizations, because they have First Amendment rights too."

"I just think that there is robust debate between these various coalitions already," Backlin added.

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Threats to religious freedom growing in US, speakers say

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Under the watchful gaze of Baptist pioneer Roger Williams, speakers at a convocation sponsored by two Baptist organizations sounded notes of serious concern over the status of religious freedom in the United States.

Several speakers noted what they consider serious threats to religious freedom during a Sept. 30-Oct. 1 meeting in Washington, called "Reclaiming an Historic Baptist Principle: Separation of Church and State."

Most of the convocation's sessions were held at the historic First Baptist Church of Washington, which contains two stained-glass windows devoted to Roger Williams. After getting kicked out of the Massachusetts Bay Colony for refusing to practice Puritanism in accordance with the wishes of state leaders, Williams founded both the colony of Rhode Island and the first Baptist church in the New World.

Speaker after speaker suggested that modern American political events might make Williams wonder what happened to his vision of religious liberty for all and opposition to state enforcement of religious values.

"Events of the past three years confirm that we are in the midst of a serious re-ordering of church-state policies," said Melissa Rogers, who is stepping down as the director of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life to become a visiting professor at Baptist-related Wake Forest Divinity School.

Referring to recent Supreme Court decisions on church-state issues, Rogers noted in the convocation's keynote address that Justice Sandra Day O'Connor has often been the "swing vote" in those cases. She referred specifically to *Zelman vs. Simmons-Harris*, the controversial 2002 decision that said programs that provide government-funded scholarships to poor students for use at private schools, including religious schools, did not violate the Constitution's ban on government support for religion.

O'Connor said the program was constitutional because it didn't provide direct aid to the parochial schools, but the aid rather flowed indirectly, through the private choices of the parents and students involved. The other four justices who ruled in the majority said the payments wouldn't run afoul of the Constitution even if they were direct.

"We are only one justice away from a ruling court majority that would uphold this radical departure from traditional Constitutional interpretation," Rogers said.

Likewise, Detroit minister Charles Adams said the "sacred separation of church and state" is in dire need of defense.

Delivering the convocation's opening address, Adams specifically denounced President Bush's efforts to provide public money to religious institutions -- such as parochial schools and church-based drug-treatment programs -- to conduct social services. "To mingle government funds with church funds is to entangle the church with government -- and control the church by government," he said, speaking on the steps of the Jefferson Memorial.

Adams is pastor of Hartford Memorial Baptist Church, an historically African-American congregation in Detroit. Although Bush has relied heavily on inner-city churches operating social ministries to push his "faith-based initiative," Adams said those churches will regret it in the long run. For instance, he said, accepting government funds inevitably opens a private organization to a whole host of legal regulations and problems.

That, according to Adams, could eventually hurt the effectiveness of the very ministries that inspired the government support in the first place. "If you want to protect yourself against legal challenges, you're going to have to know more about the federal code than about the holy Bible," he said.

Adams, Rogers and other speakers also argued that Christians who support church-state separation have public-relations challenges.

Rogers said that, in a public discourse on church-state issues that often pits liberal secularists against religious conservatives, the voice of Christians who support separation for theological reasons often gets drowned out.

"We're facing a constant communications battle to adequately convey these ideas to the general public," she said. "Religious liberty is best protected when the government leaves [religion] alone.... We want this freedom because it protects and respects human dignity."

Rep. Chet Edwards (D-Texas), one of Congress' most outspoken supporters of church-state separation, said like-minded Christians need an entire network of political groups, "think tanks" and media outlets to combat the attacks from both right and left.

"I think we can win on this issue," Edwards said, "because I think we are right on this issue."

The meeting was sponsored by the Washington-based Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Virginia-based Center for Baptist Heritage and Studies.

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'Celebrants' provide funerals for unchurched people

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- In a society where half the population claims no religious affiliation, a growing number of people don't want a minister conducting their funeral.

In fact, many are forgoing any memorial service. When they do, it leaves "a gap" in the grieving process for loved ones left behind, according to Perry Kite, a Baptist layman who served more than 40 years with the Dallas Institute of Funeral Service, first as dean and later as president.

"People end up feeling a loss in not getting to say 'goodbye' and having the opportunity to communicate about the person who is deceased," said Kite. "When they play like it didn't really happen, it ends up being hard on people."

Author Doug Manning put it in even starker terms. When there is no funeral, he said the deceased person remains "missing and presumed dead" to loved ones.

To fill that void, Manning is leading a movement to provide a meaningful secular alternative to religious funerals. Funerals have healing power, and they don't lose that power just because they are not overtly religious, he said.

When non-religious people die, their families and friends need a significant service that reflects the values and life of the deceased, said Manning, writer and publisher of widely distributed resources on grief, including "Don't Take My Grief Away From Me."

"They deserve funerals. They hurt just like we do. But for the most part, all we have offered have been religious funerals," said the former Baptist preacher.

An alternative that emerged more than 10 years ago in Australia and New Zealand is the civil celebrant, a layperson trained to conduct non-religious funerals and weddings. Currently, in parts of New Zealand, civil celebrants perform six out of every 10 funerals.

About five years ago, Manning started writing about the "celebrant" concept in funeral home trade publications. In response to the interest expressed, he developed the curriculum for a training program, and about 300 certified celebrants have completed the 16-hour course.

Celebrants offer personalized services focusing on the life of the deceased individual in a way that reflects that person's beliefs and lifestyle, he explained. The services include recollections about the person who died, as well as meaningful readings or songs consistent with that person's values.

One reason some people choose a celebrant is that he or she holds a meeting with the bereaved loved ones, where they are able to tell stories about the deceased and recount fond memories, Manning explained.

"Communication about the deceased, and about each other, is so important," Kite added. "It can be a part of the funeral service, or it can be around the breakfast table, but there needs to be some opportunity for people to communicate their feelings."

Instead of granting those opportunities, too many ministers minimize them, Manning said. They have one or two prepared funeral sermons they use in every instance, without making the effort to spend time with family members and learn about the person who died, he said.

"A funeral can be such a healing thing if it is personalized," Manning said. "If you don't make it personal, you've missed them."

Veteran pastor and denominational leader James Semple agreed. "Something ought to be said about the significance of the life that has been lived. It shouldn't be a non-event when any person passes on," he said.

Semple said he often conducted more than 50 funerals a year during his quarter century as pastor of First Baptist Church in Paris, Texas. He lost track of how many funerals he participated in, but said he remembered frequently leading three a day.

"My main objective has always been to bring comfort to the family," said Semple. "I have rarely preached sermons at funerals. The local funeral directors knew that if I were conducting the service, they could pretty well set their watch by it. Everything would be over in 25 minutes. People at funerals are not interested -- or often capable of hearing -- a long treatise or discourse."

Semple customarily met with family members before he prepared his funeral message. He encouraged them to tell stories about the deceased, and he asked if any of those remembrances might be included in the service as a tribute to their lives.

"Nearly everyone has something good that can be said about them," Semple said.

But not every minister takes the time to show that level of personal interest, particularly in non-church members, Manning said. Instead, they sometimes impose their beliefs on people who are not receptive, or they offer the hope of life after death to those who don't even believe in it.

"If all we do is talk about heaven, we've missed them," he said.

Some people feel emotionally abused by ministers, Manning noted. "Most people aren't anti-God. But many of them are anti-religion or anti-clergy."

One reason some people choose celebrants is fear that clergy will turn funerals into inappropriate evangelistic appeals, he said.

"I cringe when a preacher motions toward the deceased and says, 'If he were here today, this is what he would say to you.' And then he ignores the life of that person by trying to make converts," Manning said. "There is nothing on earth more inappropriate than giving an invitation at a funeral. I've never met anybody who was converted at a funeral."

Semple differs with Manning, up to a point. Nearly every funeral he has conducted included a simple

presentation of the Christian gospel in the service. To dwell only on the positive contributions of the deceased could give listeners the impression that salvation is earned by good works, he noted.

"I would end the service with the promise of Jesus never to leave us alone. I would tell the family the Lord loved them, that he cared for them, and that he would never leave them alone," he said.

And if a Christian specifically asked that the plan of salvation be presented as part of his or her funeral service so that non-Christian relatives and friends could hear the gospel, Semple granted the request, making a specific evangelistic appeal.

But Semple and Kite agreed with Manning that a public altar call at a funeral would not be appropriate. Rather than calling on sinners to "walk the aisle" and repent, they suggested asking people to raise their hands during a prayer to indicate their desire to make a faith commitment to Christ.

In all his years of ministry, Semple said he never had anyone request that he do a strictly secular service with no prayer or Scripture. But if a family specifically requested a memorial service with no religious elements in it, he said, "In order to have a relationship with them, I might go along with it... It is their service."

Establishing a relationship that can lead to ministry later is one thing that draws some ministers to celebrant training events, Manning said.

"They see it as outreach," he explained. If a Christian celebrant provides a meaningful memorial service for a non-religious person that honors the life of a deceased and the wishes of survivors, then the believer has earned the right to offer a gospel witness to the bereaved family later in the grieving process.

"For a lot of celebrants who are deeply religious, I can see that it would be hard for them to do a secular service. I'm sure it would be for me," Kite noted. "But I can think of no greater open door you could have for ministry to a non-Christian.... Honor the person they loved, and they'll welcome you with open arms.

"Minister to them at their time of loss. Then when you go back to see them later, that's when some may be ready to say, 'I see that you have something better than what I've got. Tell me about it.'"

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Chance to grieve, take stock, move on gives funerals meaning, author says

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- What makes a funeral meaningful? Doug Manning, a former Baptist pastor and author of several widely distributed books about grief, offers several observations:

-- It offers a safe place to grieve. "People need permission to grieve," he said. "...A funeral is the last place on earth where it's OK to grieve publicly. And too often, we try to hide it, to sanitize it, to get through it without anybody crying."

-- It underscores the reality of the loss. "I believe it is best for the family to view the body, whether anybody else does or not," he said. "It's not real until you see it. That which we leave to the imagination comes back to

haunt us."

-- It establishes significance, both of the life that has ended and of the loss to those who survive. Funerals provide the bereaved a chance to "inventory their loss," Manning explained. By talking about the deceased, and hearing others talk about that person's contributions, family and friends can establish the significance of the loss and begin to "move on," he said.

-- It offers bereaved survivors a specific time and place to recall where a deceased family member or friend was honored. It provides "roots" and "connection" to the one whose life has ended. "There needs to be a place where the loved one is remembered," Manning insisted.

-- It provides a place where the ministry of presence is practiced. Bereaved people need companionship, Manning emphasized. "It's not what we say. It's where we are. Folks just need somebody to be there with them."

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Christians help by understanding 'layers of grief,' author says

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Grief is like peeling an onion, says author Doug Manning. "It comes off one layer at a time -- and you cry a lot."

The former Baptist pastor said Christians can help grieving family members and friends by understanding their pain. The first thing to recognize is that grief is a messy process, not a clear-cut series of stages that each person passes through in a prescribed time period, he said.

"Grief is as unique as a fingerprint," Manning said. "Each experience is unique unto itself. There's no schedule, no right way to think, and no right way to peel away the layers."

The days between a death and a funeral are like the paper-thin outer skin of an onion that comes off easily and blows away, he explained. Those are the days when the bereaved person is in shock and is surrounded by caring people carrying casserole dishes, he added.

"We give people the most help when they can receive it the least, when they are all awhirl. But the funeral is often the climactic event in the care and comfort offered by friends," he said.

Once that superficial outer skin is removed, he said, then the real grieving process begins in three identifiable layers:

-- Reality. A few weeks after the funeral, the shock wears off and the reality of loss sets in. "That's when you crash," he noted. Manning maintained that Christians can help at this point by doing three things: "Hang around, hug them and hush."

-- Reaction. At some point, anger emerges. "Anger is a natural reaction to being hurt. When the anger comes out, it means the grieving person has hit bottom and is starting to fight back," Manning said. "The problem

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with anger is that it doesn't float well. It needs a place to focus."

The object of anger may be the deceased person, a physician, a minister, a surviving family member or even God. Anger only becomes unhealthy when it becomes internalized and self-directed, Manning said. At this point, the main thing the grieving person needs is a companion who will "get in their bucket with them" and walk with them through the process, he said.

-- Reconstruction. Eventually, the grieving person will move on with life, but Christians can help them realize that life will never be like it was before the loss. "A chunk has been bitten out of your heart, and it will never grow back," Manning said. "But we can offer assurance that the sharp pain will eventually become a dull ache."

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BGCT board elects African-American, approves revised NAMB agreement

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- The Executive Board of the Baptist General Convention of Texas ratified a revised cooperative agreement with the North American Mission Board and elected its first African-American chairman Sept. 30.

John Ogletree, pastor of First Metropolitan Baptist Church in Houston, was elected board chairman by acclamation, succeeding Brian Harbour of Richardson. Ogletree has served as vice chairman of the Executive Board the last two years.

The board also recommended a \$45.8 million operating budget for 2004.

With only a dozen dissenting votes, the board approved a revised working agreement between the BGCT and NAMB. At previous meetings, the board had voted on two earlier versions of the document, but each was met by counter-proposals from the SBC missions agency.

One matter of concern was the NAMB requirement that its personnel comply with the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," a faith statement approved by the Southern Baptist Convention but rejected by the BGCT.

The agreement retains the requirement that jointly supported personnel conform to procedures and requirements of both NAMB and the BGCT. In addition, the revised agreement states, "When North American Mission Board funds are used, both entities acknowledge that personnel must comply with North American Mission Board's requirements concerning the Baptist Faith and Message 2000, though this does not indicate affirmation of the Baptist Faith and Message 2000 by the Baptist General Convention of Texas."

NAMB provides full financial support for fewer than 60 missionaries throughout North America. Most NAMB-appointed missionaries are funded cooperatively by local Baptist associations, state Baptist conventions or both. NAMB typically pays for insurance benefits and often contributes a salary supplement, while the other partners bear the remaining expense. The BGCT will pick up the entire compensation package for any missionary related to Texas mission efforts who does not wish to sign the Baptist Faith and Message 2000.

The other matter that had prevented acceptance of earlier agreements was language acknowledging the BGCT practice of retaining funds the convention believed NAMB otherwise would have routed back to Texas. The rationale cited at the time for retaining funds was to "enable Texas Baptists to plan and fulfill missions strategies within Texas more efficiently, by greatly reducing paperwork, bureaucracy, time consuming documentation and delays."

In a letter sent to board members, BGCT Executive Director Charles Wade wrote, "That rationale no longer holds. New processes and funding channels created by NAMB assure us that the problems faced earlier will no longer be present."

Also at its Sept. 30 meeting, the Executive Board voted to recommend a \$45,800,960 total budget for next year, a 10 percent decrease from the 2003 budget. Of that amount, \$39.8 million is dependent upon the Cooperative Program giving of Texas Baptist churches.

The Cooperative Program portion is a 14 percent drop from the 2003 giving goal, but it is in line with projected income for this year, according to David Nabors, BGCT treasurer and chief financial officer. Messengers to the BGCT annual meeting, Nov. 10-11 in Lubbock, will vote on the budget proposal approved by the board.

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New poll reveals complex attitudes toward important church-state issues

By Robert Marus

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Nearly a month after a highly publicized controversy over a Ten Commandments monument in an Alabama courthouse, a new poll suggests that Americans have complex attitudes regarding such church-state issues.

The USA Today/CNN/Gallup Poll, released Sept. 30, comes on the heels of a highly public controversy sparked by Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore. Moore created a standoff with the federal government over a monument to the Ten Commandments he had installed in the rotunda of the state's judicial headquarters. Two federal courts ruled the monument was an unconstitutional state endorsement of religion, forcing its removal.

The poll revealed that an overwhelming majority of the public supports displays of the Ten Commandments in government buildings. Seventy percent of respondents approved of such displays, while only 29 percent disapproved.

An even higher percentage disagreed that such a display "sends a message that the justice system gives special consideration to Jews and Christians over those who belong to other religions" -- part of the federal courts' reasoning in the Moore case. Only 25 percent of respondents believed that Ten Commandments displays in courthouses send such a message, while 73 percent said they do not.

However, the poll also revealed that such support may not extend to displays such as Moore's. A separate question asked if it was acceptable to display only Christian symbols in public buildings, or symbols of Christianity as long as other religions' symbols were included.

Only 10 percent of respondents said it was acceptable to display Christian symbols exclusively, while 58 percent said symbols of other religions should be included alongside the Christian symbol. Twenty-nine percent said it was unacceptable to display any religious symbols in public buildings.

The poll results also suggested complex and sometimes conflicting views toward the motivations of those who oppose government endorsement of religious ideas.

While supporters of government display of religious symbols often argue that their opponents are attempting to erase any mention of religion from the public square, the public may think otherwise.

For instance, a poll question asked, "In your opinion, which comes closer to your view of why some people file lawsuits opposing such things as prayer in public schools or displays of religious symbols in government buildings - they are trying to turn the United States into a godless society, or they are trying to protect themselves and others from having religion forced onto them?"

Of respondents to this question, 62 percent said they believed opponents of government religious displays were simply trying to protect themselves and other religious minorities, while only 31 percent of respondents believed those who file such lawsuits want to erase religion from the public sphere.

The poll also found that a majority of Americans believe government endorsement of religion can harm religious minorities. Fifty-four percent of respondents said anytime the government promotes religious teachings, it "can harm the rights of people who do not belong to that religion." Forty percent believed government can promote a religion without harming the rights of non-believers.

On another controversial issue -- government funding for religiously based social services -- public opinion was split depending on which religion provided the services. A strong majority -- 64 percent -- of respondents in the survey approved the use of federal funds for community-service organizations run by Christian groups. However, a similar majority -- 56 percent -- disapproved of government funding for Islamic social-service organizations.

One of the central goals of President Bush's domestic agenda has been government funding for religious charities to perform social work. Most proponents of his plan have insisted that no religion would be favored or disfavored in the awarding of government contracts.

The poll also revealed that support remains strong for some forms of government-endorsed prayer in public schools. Of respondents, 78 percent approved of a "non-denominational prayer" at the start of school ceremonies such as commencement or sporting events.

However, when asked if religious leaders should attempt to influence public policy on prayer in public schools, respondents were much more divided. Fifty-three percent said "yes," while 46 percent said "no."

On two other controversial social issues -- abortion and the death penalty -- majorities said religious leaders should not try to influence government policy.

Reaction to the survey was as mixed as were its results. In his daily e-mail newsletter Sept. 30, Family Research Council President Tony Perkins said the poll revealed that "Americans are overwhelmingly thumbing their noses at liberal judicial activists who seek to strip the public square of all references to God."

But Alan Wolfe, director of the Boston College's Center for Religion and American Public Life, said the results were more complex. "The mood of the country in general is that God is very important and religion is

very important," he said, according to USA Today. "But I would make a distinction between religion in general and specific religions. People think it's quite proper to have religion in public if it's broad and inclusive."

The poll was based on phone interviews with 1,003 adults nationwide. It was conducted Sept. 19-21. The margin of error was plus or minus three percentage points.

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