



# REPORT from the CAPITAL

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## NEWS MAKERS

Henry J. Lyons, pastor of Bethel Metropolitan Baptist Church in St. Petersburg, Fla., was elected Sept. 8 to a five-year term as president of the National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc. NBC, the nation's largest African American church group, is a national member body of the Baptist Joint Committee. Lyons, 52, a convention vice president, vowed to work at increasing the political and economic power of African Americans and make the convention a force to be reckoned with in Congress and the White House. Lyons succeeds T.J. Jemison, who served 12 years in office.

Irene Pivetti, the 31-year-old president of the Italian House of Representatives, has sparked a debate in Italy over the role of Catholics in political life. Pivetti said that Catholics from all political parties should unite to defend commonly held values. She blamed the Christian Democrat party for the de-Christianization of the country.

Robert W. Tiller, director of American Baptist National Ministries' Office of Governmental Relations and a BJC board member, recently expressed support for District of Columbia statehood in written testimony presented to a U.S. Senate committee. The 600,000 residents of the district are subject to federal law but have no voting power, he wrote.

Rabbi Avi Weiss, just back from a tour of Eastern Europe, has warned that the sites of former Nazi death camps are being Christianized by the presence of churches and crosses. "The issue is that a cross at Auschwitz is as inappropriate as a Jewish star would be at the largest Christian cemetery in the world," he said. Δ

## Clinton orders change in tithing dispute stance

Acting on instructions from President Clinton, the Justice Department has withdrawn its argument that a Minnesota church cannot keep tithes given by a couple headed for bankruptcy.

The department had argued that the \$13,450 donated by Bruce and Nancy Young to Crystal Evangelical Free Church actually belongs to their creditors and should be recovered from the church.

Particularly troubling to religious groups was the Justice Department's stance that recovering the funds from the church did not violate a new religious freedom law designed to enhance protections for religious practice.

The Religious Freedom Restoration Act, signed by Clinton in November, restored a legal standard that allows government to restrict religious practice only for a compelling reason.

Senior administration officials said Clinton's "exceptional interest" in RFRA prompted the rare action of ordering the Justice Department to abandon its position in the case. The department withdrew from the case the day before it was scheduled for argument in a federal appeals court.

Clinton's action is consistent with his support of RFRA, said senior administration officials, who noted that the president's remarks when he signed the bill were more than routine.

Officials said the president's view is reflected in his statement at the signing

that, "Government should be held to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's free exercise of religion."

Religious organizations that had challenged the department's stance quickly praised the reversal.

*"Government should be held to a very high level of proof before it interferes with someone's free exercise of religion."*

— President Clinton

"President Clinton has proven that he is sincerely committed to meaningful legal protection for religious exercise," declared Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center

for Law and Religious Freedom. "The administration has told government lawyers nationwide that the Religious Freedom Restoration Act is not a toothless tiger."

The CLS, along with other religious groups including the Baptist Joint Committee, had filed a friend-of-the-court brief siding with the church.

BJC General Counsel J. Brent Walker commended the administration for "doing the right thing."

"It takes courage to admit a mistake and reverse a legal argument," Walker said. "This is further proof that President Clinton cares deeply about the free exercise of religion and spiritual values."

The administration will pursue "vigilant enforcement" of religious freedom, senior officials said. Should the Minnesota tithing case be decided against the church, the administration will seek to change bankruptcy laws to protect tithes given in good faith, officials said. Δ

## Clinton urges dialogue, less stridency in nation

Frustrated by the strident tones he senses in the nation, President Clinton challenged about 60 religious leaders Sept. 8 to encourage dialogue among people who disagree on the issues.

Clinton's appeal came at a White House breakfast — the second large group of religious representatives he has hosted. Baptist leaders — including former Baptist Joint Committee board member John Binder — were among those attending.

Other Baptists present included Rex Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church, Little Rock, Clinton's home church; Everett Goodwin, an American Baptist pastor in Washington; Henry Blackaby, of the Home Mission Board; Patrick Anderson, criminology professor at Florida Southern College, Lakeland, and moderator-elect of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship; Harold Phillips, minister of education at Second Baptist Church, Liberty, Mo., and moderator of the Baptist Fellowship of Missouri; and Jim Henry, Southern Baptist Convention president.

At the breakfast, Clinton called on religious leaders to help him overcome the gridlock and intransigence that blocks progress on substantive issues.

Clinton said he is deeply disappointed that in two years he has made no headway in changing the partisan, pessimistic political climate in Washington, participants said. While significant progress could be made on consensus issues, he said, Washington focuses on "minor" issues.

Clinton told the religious leaders that "the values we share are greater than the culture war that divides us," Phillips said.

Binder, executive director of the North American Baptist Conference and newly elected vice president of the Baptist World Alliance, said, "President Clinton appealed to us as religious leaders to try to understand each other's differing positions. We need substantial discussions and to stop shouting at others with whom we differ.

"We need to learn to affirm others who are different and still maintain our own convictions with integrity.

"Let us do together what we agree on, and keep on talking about our dif-

ferences.

Clinton expressed frustration with how his administration is perceived.

"I believe I am doing what the American people want, but somehow it seems we are not in the proper rhythm," he reportedly said. Citing the Mideast peace agreements, unification of Europe and other signs of progress, Clinton said, "I believe we are doing more right than wrong, but people believe the opposite.

"Why can't people who disagree sit down together and say, 'What does the Bible say about this really?' ... Why can't we find some areas of agreement?" Clinton reportedly asked.

"He was asking for help," Anderson said afterward. "He was asking for all of us to figure out how to engage in dialogue with those who disagree with us.

"Unless I'm snowed, here's a guy who genuinely wants to make a differ-

ence," said Anderson. "He's going to do as much as he can as long as he's there. ... It sort of makes me want to do better.

"He sees the world as a cafeteria of opportunity, whereas another guy sees it as a nightmare of problems."

Anderson met Clinton after the breakfast and promised to pray for him. "I said I wanted him to know I was appalled at the vicious personal attacks he was receiving from so-called Christian leaders. I told him I know it takes a heavy toll on him and his family."

Horne said he hopes such meetings will promote "better and greater dialogue" between the president and those who disagree with him.

Henry and other Southern Baptists met privately with Clinton and Vice President Al Gore after the meeting. "I assured them that they would be at the heart of our prayers," Henry said. Δ

## Melissa Rogers joins BJC legal staff



MELISSA ROGERS

Melissa Rogers, a former associate in a District of Columbia law firm, has been named associate general counsel at the Baptist Joint Committee.

Rogers, who is pursuing a master of arts degree in history at George Mason University in Fairfax, Va., has been volunteering services to the Washington-based religious liberty agency since March.

Rogers will fill the associate general counsel's position on a part-time basis beginning Oct. 1.

The position previously was held on a full-time basis by J. Brent Walker, who was promoted to general counsel at the BJC in October.

Rogers is a 1991 graduate of the University of Pennsylvania School of Law and a cum laude graduate of Baylor University in 1988.

She was an associate in the D.C. firm of Dow, Lohnes & Albertson from 1991-93, where she specialized in telecommunications law. More recently she taught government and economics in the Holton-Arms School in Bethesda, Md. She is a member of the Maryland and D.C. bars.

Walker said Rogers "is uniquely qualified for the position. She has deep Baptist roots and an appreciation for the principle of soul liberty that informs our view of church-state relations.

"Melissa is a first-rate lawyer. Her presence will expand the BJC's ability to meet effectively challenges to religious liberty and church-state separation."

James M. Dunn, BJC executive director, said, "Melissa's energized enlightenment enhances the tradition and burnishes the image of the Baptist Joint Committee's legal involvements."

Rogers is married to Stan Fendley, tax counsel to the Senate Small Business Committee. Her father, Bill Rogers, is professor of Christian education at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Ky. Δ

## PEW, PULPIT & the LAW

**Q:** If ratified by the Senate, will the U.N. Convention on the Rights of the Child destroy parental "rights" and supersede the Constitution as some have said?

**A:** No. Parental rights are specifically reaffirmed. Article 5 provides that in carrying out the Convention, participating parties "shall respect the responsibilities, rights, and duties of parents." It would prevent only the "arbitrary and unlawful" interference with a child's privacy. And, a treaty can never supersede the protections afforded citizens under the Constitution.

We have received numerous calls over the last two months about this matter. The BJC has no position on the Convention but has done some research on it. More information may be obtained by contacting the BJC or the co-sponsors, Sens. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., or Richard Lugar, R-Ind. (JBW)

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## REFLECTIONS

## Decide for yourself



JAMES M. DUNN

Executive Director

prehend how profoundly outrageous the goals, evil the methods and pervasive the influence of religio-political extremists. Many see those so labeled as merely religious and political conservatives.

How dangerous our naivete!

How frightening our ignorance!

Thank God for the Anti-Defamation League's publication of *The Religious Right: The Assault on Tolerance and Pluralism in America*. In the most concise, reader-friendly fashion David Cantor of the Anti-Defamation League has pulled together under one cover not only the facts but also the feelings we know as we face these fanatics.

It would be easy to focus on shared concerns with these political fundamentalists. As a born-again Baptist who still preaches revival meetings and believes the Bible, as a sinner saved by grace who confesses Jesus Christ as Lord, I share many of their cares.

It will surely be said that what follows takes words out of context. It does. But to read the original setting or hear the frantically spoken word simply reinforces our warnings about the warriors on the far right. I testify to you that the passages below fairly represent the sort of stuff being said.

It is obvious that there also are threats to civility and civilization from the far left. Those challenges must be met. Just now, however, the abysmal failure of communism

**Question:** Why do you keep on carrying on about the Radical Right?

**Answer:**

Because I'm convinced that good people of every spiritual hue, precisely for their decency, cannot com-

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# Families a priority, president tells Baptists

**P**resident Clinton touted strengthening families as a national priority in a message to the nation's largest African American Baptist denomination meeting in New Orleans Sept. 9.

Speaking at a convention of the 8 million-member National Baptist Convention, U.S.A., Clinton, a Southern Baptist, urged Americans to combat social ills through strong families that value children.

"I know that not everybody is going to be in a stable, traditional family like you see in one of those 1950 sitcoms, but we'd be better off if more people were," Clinton said.

Clinton decried high rates of both abortion and out-of-wedlock births in America.

While a frank assessment of declining values is important in debate, Clinton warned against those who would lead the country into cyn-

icism by harping on negatives.

"I note that there are many voices from all sectors preaching to us today about the decline in our values. In a way I welcome them all. And whether they are traditionally our allies or our adversaries, we should listen to the truth of their words; and if they are true, we should heed them," he said.

Clinton cautioned that Americans "should not let the voices of despair make our insecurities even deeper.

"There have always been problems in every society and there will be until the end of time. That is the lesson of Scripture. So for all the people who try to use the difficulties of the moment to dampen the energies of Americans, to defeat our spirits — I say, that is wrong. The Scripture says, 'Let us not grow weary in well-doing, for ... we shall reap if we do not lose heart.'"

Clinton said he still believes government has a role to play in improving Americans' lives, but urged progress in efforts that go beyond government programs.

Clinton offered four proposals, each dealing with children. The president urged "every American" to value children and to work for stronger families, to create environments in which children can "grow up without fear," to instill them with self-respect and hope for the future and to return "an ethic of service" in the country.

"We are raising a whole generation of kids who aren't sure they're the most important person in the world to anybody," Clinton said.

"I believe and you believe that every child has a gift of God within them," he said. "When the gift dies, it is our sin as well as theirs and our loss as well as theirs." (ABP) Δ

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