



# REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

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## NewsMakers

◆ **Holly Shaver** of Burke, Va., has begun a fall internship with the Baptist Joint Committee, where she will work on legal and legislative matters. She studied English at the College of William and Mary in Williamsburg, Va., and graduated in May.

◆ **Don Hodel**, new president of the Christian Coalition, said the group's top priority will be "fighting the persecution of Christians and other religious people" worldwide. Other legislative initiatives on the coalition's agenda would permit government funding of religious schools and faith-based social services, as well as a constitutional amendment to allow school-sponsored prayer.

◆ **Patriarch Alexii II**, head of the Russian Orthodox Church, called for a complete ban on proselytizing in Russia by "non-traditional" faiths. The Russian Itar-Tass news agency quoted Alexii as saying that "North American" religious freedom was out of place in Russia.

◆ **Will Campbell**, author, philosopher and preacher-at-large, has been selected recipient of the 1997 Religious Freedom Award by Associated Baptist Press. Campbell, known for his role in the civil rights movement, his support for human rights and his 1977 autobiography, *Brother to a Dragonfly*, will receive the award at a Sept. 19 banquet in Memphis, Tenn. Δ

## Lawmakers set to address religious persecution, vouchers

With a balanced budget deal in place, spending bills are the next major challenge facing Congress. But as they resume work, lawmakers are also expected to consider measures to fund religious schools and a bill to curb global religious persecution.

"We should see a new focus on domestic social issues and conservatives are going to insist that it include religious freedom issues," said Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom.

Debate is expected over proposals to give "vouchers" to low-income parents for tuition at private and parochial schools. Some lawmakers want to attach a voucher plan to a funding bill for the District of Columbia.

Several religious liberty advocates oppose the proposals and say they violate the separation of church and state.

Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director James M. Dunn said he opposes vouchers because they force taxpayers to support religious instruction. "They are an unconscionable and unconstitutional expenditure of public funds for private and parochial purposes," he said.

Another congressional proposal to boost the availability of funds for private and parochial schools would allow parents to place money in a savings account, earning tax-free interest, for primary and secondary school tuition.

Another measure being pushed by the Republican leadership is the American Community Renewal Act. The far-reaching proposal would provide tax benefits to low-income communities, funds for sectarian social services and would require participating 'renewal' communities to enact voucher programs.

Lawmakers are also expected to move forward with the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would provide greater accommodation for the

religious practices of workers in the private sector.

House members hope to introduce a bill this fall to respond to the Supreme Court's invalidation of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a 1993 law that bolstered protection for religious activity.

No further hearings have been scheduled for the constitutional amendment proposed by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., that would allow some forms of school-sponsored prayer and government-endorsed religious speech. It would also permit religious groups to receive public benefits, such as vouchers.

McFarland said the Istook measure "is not moving anywhere."

One popular bill is set to move swiftly through House committees. The Freedom From Religious Persecution Act would create an office of religious persecution monitoring. The office could impose sanctions against countries engaged in a pattern of religious persecution. Δ



## Opposition to vouchers softening, survey shows

Opposition to public funding of private education appears to be softening, according to a Gallup survey released Aug. 26.

Commissioned by Phi Delta Kappa, a professional educators group, the survey showed a continuing decline in the percentage of Americans who oppose allowing students to attend a private school at public expense.

In 1993, less than one-fourth (24 percent) of respondents favored public funding of private education while 74 percent opposed it. This year, 44 percent of respondents favored the idea while 52 percent opposed it.

A slight majority (49 percent to 48 percent) favored a "proposal that would allow parents to send their school-age children to any public, private or church-related school they choose," with the government paying for all or part of the tuition at private and church-related schools. Last year, 54 percent opposed this proposal while 43 percent favored it.

The 1997 survey also found that 78 percent of respondents think nonpublic schools that receive public funds should be "required to accept students from a wider range of backgrounds and academic ability than is now generally the case."

Sixty-five percent of those surveyed indicated it would be "higher-achieving" students who would take the opportunity to attend private schools.

The survey of 1,517 adults had a margin of error of plus or minus 3 percent.

Voucher opponents cautioned against reading too much into the poll's voucher results and against ignoring them.

James M. Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the poll results showing an increase in support for vouchers "reflect an incredible degree of superficiality on the part of respondents who've not been asked the hard questions or asked to deal with the substantive issues involved."

In contrast, he said, "in state referenda, where voters have taken a more in-depth look at the issues involved, they have consistently turned down spending public money for parochial purposes."

National Education Association President Bob Chase said that public school supporters "should heed the warning bell rung by the number of people who advo-

cate 'alternatives' to ... public schools."

He said the NEA endorses the concept of public school choice, but is "convinced that taxpayer-funded vouchers to send a select few children to private or religious schools are not a viable alternative. Vouchers are not a magic pill that will make public schools better."

## Wisconsin appeals court invalidates voucher plan

The push to fund parochial education with tax dollars suffered another setback Aug. 22 when a Wisconsin appeals court ruled that religious schools' participation in a Milwaukee voucher program violates the state constitution.

The Milwaukee program allows students from lower-income families to use tax dollars to attend the private nonsectarian school of their choice. But by expanding the program in 1995 to include religious schools, the state legislature violated the church-state separation requirements of the state constitution, the 4th District Court of Appeals said.

Wisconsin's Constitution bars the compelled support of any place of worship or ministry and prohibits use of state funds to benefit religious groups or schools.

Upholding a lower court ruling, the appeals court noted that state payments under the expanded program could reach \$60 million annually, with over \$40 million going to religious schools.

"We thus conclude that a 'primary effect' of the amended program is the drawing of money from the state treasury for the benefit of religious schools," the appeals court said.

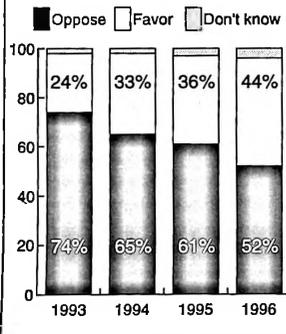
Steven Green, legal director for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, said the appeals court ruling is "in line with what other courts have held. We now have four different courts in four different states and territories saying vouchers are unconstitutional when they apply to religious schools."

In addition to Wisconsin, courts have invalidated religious school choice plans in Puerto Rico, Vermont and Ohio.

The Wisconsin and Ohio cases are being closely watched by opponents and supporters of vouchers. In the Ohio dispute, a state appeals court said the Cleveland voucher plan violates the state and U.S. constitutions. Green predicted that one or both will eventually reach the U.S. Supreme Court. Δ

### 29th Annual Phi Delta Kappa/ Gallup Poll

Do you favor or oppose allowing students and parents to choose a private school to attend at public expense?



# Reflections

*James M. Dunn*

Executive Director



What can one person do? Brooks Hays proved the power of a faith that took on flesh. His work demonstrated indisputably that a dedicated individual can redirect the flow of history. His life linked personal religion with political reality in a way rarely equalled.

The congressman from Arkansas is on our minds because it was 40 years ago, Sept. 24, 1957, that he was a major player in the integration of Little Rock Central High School. That involvement contributed to his involuntary retirement.

When he passed away 16 years ago I wrote, "Brooks Hays translated into flesh and blood the compassion of our Savior for all sorts of folks, especially those who are poor and suffering and victims of a society that they cannot comprehend and with which they cannot cope."

How like Jesus is this incarnation!

That incarnational principle is more basic than principle, more pervasive than a lesson, more visceral than example. No amount of grit and gumption can match the merging of soul and body that God did in the person of Jesus. "The Word was made flesh and dwelt among us."

That's the way God sent his Son, Himself, to us. That's the way God loves us, in one being, fully God, fully man. That's the way we see God, if indeed we ever do see God, in mere mortals so attuned to folks that they act out the heavenly stuff in ordinary transactions.

Brooks knew the oneness of faith and flesh. He understood that no creedal, ideational, propositional head trip bore any resemblance to authentic Christianity. He told the Southern Baptist Historical Society, "From the glib way in which some of the zealous ones speak of Jesus, without evidencing any interest in the application of his teachings to social evils, doubt is cast on their understanding of His place in history."

Congressman Hays not only understood, he embodied that oneness of the Word of God and the work of human

beings.

Then, it is seen as hopelessly naive to believe that one individual can affect history. I move in a crowd that assumes that everything is shaped by economics. Many faithful Christians honestly believe that "whatever will be, will be." Others see social change coming only by grassroots movements fueled by compelling ideologies. Hardly anyone still believes that one life can make a difference.

Look at the impact of the death of Princess Diana on the Royal family, the United Kingdom and the world. Surely any dolt can figure out that one human being can alter the course of history.

Brooks Hays did exactly that when he brought Governor Faubus and President Eisenhower together to consider Little Rock. And again, days later when he believed for integration because he believed black children should be permitted to exercise their constitutional rights to attend public school in Little Rock.

The ongoing struggle for social justice facing segregated schools was not the same from that day on. One man willing to sacrifice his seat in Congress for the right thing mattered for millions.

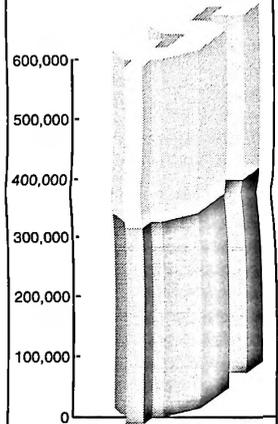
Finally, Brooks Hays did not chop up his faith into pious and practical parts. Personal morality and his social ethic were a piece of whole cloth.

He understood that individual religious experience and the application of Christianity in political terms go together. If either personal faith or social gospel is genuine, the other is implied. If personal faith fails the tests of social concern, it's phony. If the pursuit of social justice is not rooted in the conviction that it's God's work, it lacks staying power.

Brooks had a holistic faith. That's the kind that moves mountains. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. said of him, "His life has been a quest to find ways of relating religion and politics without violating the constitutional separation of church and state."

Politics was his parish. Δ

## Endowing the Baptist Joint Committee



### Gifts, pledges total \$326,500

The two most recent gifts to perpetuate the work of the Baptist Joint Committee were from middle-class families with no vast wealth. Each was for \$1,000. They set me thinking: Aren't there 200 families that could catch up on their giving by sending \$1,000 to the BJC endowment? Or maybe it's 400 folks giving \$500 each or 800 sending \$250.

Oh well, you've heard that sort of thing before. We're not arm-twisting, but let's get this funding for the future fixed.

*James M. Dunn*

## Baptist Joint Committee

### Supporting Bodies

- ◆ Alliance of Baptists
- ◆ American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.
- ◆ Baptist General Conference
- ◆ Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
- ◆ National Baptist Convention of America
- ◆ National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.
- ◆ National Missionary Baptist Convention
- ◆ Non-Profit Baptist
- ◆ Progressive National Baptist Convention Inc.
- ◆ Religious Liberty Council
- ◆ Seventh Day Baptist General Conference
- ◆ Southern Baptist state conventions/churches

### REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

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# Report weighs threats to schools

The religious right unjustly criticizes public schools and poses a serious threat to public education, said leaders of People For the American Way, a civil-liberties organization.

At a Sept. 4 press conference, the group released *A Right Wing and a Prayer: The Religious Right and Your Public Schools*. The 104-page report focuses on nine areas of recent controversy in the nation's schools.

It claims members of the religious conservative movement are seeking school-sponsored religious activity, the teaching of creationism and public funds for religious schools.

The report also discusses battles over student expression and activities, "parental rights" initiatives, sexuality education, school reform and control of school boards. Case studies from the previous school year in 26 states are cited in an attempt to document the scope of religious right activity.

In Sarasota County, Fla., for instance, a curriculum designed to teach a Bible history course in public schools was approved. Although using the Bible as a history text in a public school has been consistently ruled unconstitutional, the curriculum was scheduled to be introduced this fall.

"Even though students are free to express their beliefs and pray in public schools, Religious Right groups have persisted in their efforts to secure passage of a 'religious freedom' constitutional amendment that would allow organized school prayers and other coercive religious activity in public schools," the report states.

The report argues that the religious right is discrediting the very idea of public education by stirring up controversy

and diverting energy away from solving the schools' real problems. As a result, it claims, the debate has now shifted to whether public schools should even exist.

The religious right has attempted to spread the message that schools are filled with leaders pursuing an "evil agenda," and play on fears by claiming that "God has been kicked out of the public schools," said senior vice-president Matthew Freeman. Real instances of infringement on the religious rights of students have been "relatively few and far between," he said.

These efforts are part of an overall movement to fundamentally alter education through a voucher system, said Deanne Duby, the group's director of education policy.

Voucher opponents must do better at educating the voters, Duby said. "Education about these initiatives quickly slows support for them," she said.

PFAW President Carole Shields said voucher supporters offer unrealistic hope to many who need real educational opportunities. "It's a dirty trick," she said, adding that it is "disingenuous" to promise better schools to needy students when vouchers would only benefit a few.

Shields said that PFAW recently joined with the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People to oppose vouchers and promote "free and open access to quality education for every child."

Shields said, "The religious right wants to shape America in their image and is intentionally leaving behind those who aren't a part of it. This debate must be about every child."

— Andrew Black  
BJC intern



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