

REPORT FROM
THE CAPITAL

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NewsMakers

◆ **Michael and William Randall**, 16-year-old-twins, have been nominated by the Orange County (Calif.) Boy Scout Council to become Eagle Scouts — the highest Scouting honor — after a court forced the council to act on their Eagle badge applications. The youths were expelled in 1991 for refusing to take an oath to God but were reinstated after a court ruled that the civil rights of the boys were violated. The badges must now be approved by Boy Scouts of America headquarters.

◆ **Densen Mafinyane**, general secretary of the Zimbabwe Council of Churches, said it would be "proper and legal" to declare the nation once known as Rhodesia a Christian country. "Other countries have declared themselves Muslim countries, and why should we not be proud to declare our country a Christian nation?" he said.

◆ **Steven K. Green**, legal director for Americans United for Separation of Church and State, says the U.S. Constitution forbids state aid to church-affiliated colleges that infuse religion throughout their curriculum. In a legal brief filed at a federal appeals court, Green rejects claims by officials at the Seventh-day Adventist-affiliated Columbia Union College in Takoma Park, Md., that Supreme Court rulings permit such aid. A

Vote on Istook amendment may coincide with graduation season

A House vote on the Religious Freedom Amendment is expected in late May or early June to coincide with graduation ceremonies at public schools, according to a spokesman for the House majority leadership.

It would be the first full House vote on a constitutional amendment concerning school prayer in 27 years. The measure is sponsored by U.S. Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla.

The vote, originally set for early July, has been moved up to "help remind people about how people of faith are stymied when they enter the public arena — in this case, with commencement exercises," said Horace Cooper, press secretary for House Majority Leader Richard Arney, R-Texas.

Cooper said the House GOP leadership made the scheduling decision.

The Istook measure would allow some forms of government-endorsed religious speech and school-sponsored prayer. It would open the door for education vouchers and other government benefits for religious groups that would otherwise be barred by the First Amendment.

Supporters of the measure say it is needed to correct court misinterpretations of the religion clauses of the First Amendment. They also say individuals are barred from expressing religious beliefs in public areas.

Opponents of the proposal, including the Baptist Joint Committee, insist that courts already protect religious practice.

They say that more education about what current law already protects can resolve religious expression disputes that arise in public schools and the public square.

Some Democratic lawmakers say the vote is being scheduled to fulfill a promise made to the Christian Coalition and other religious advocacy groups.

Cooper recalled Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich's December 1994 pledge that the body would vote on a prayer amendment by July 4, 1995. Cooper said that "a vote on the issue that the public has been concerned

about for some 30-odd years is occurring because we, in a Republican Congress, are trying to be responsive to the concerns of the public."

He denied that the vote would be styled as a vote "for" or "against" God. "We'll let the American people judge about the merits of the vote," he said.

The last House vote on a school prayer amendment occurred in November 1971, when proponents of a prayer amendment failed by 28 votes to achieve the required two-thirds majority.

On another church-state front, House leaders expect to vote on a bill that would give federal dollars to the District of Columbia to help some low-income parents send their children to private and parochial schools. Cooper said a vote on the D.C. voucher measure, which cleared the Senate last year, is expected in mid-May. President Clinton is expected to veto the measure. A



House nears
first vote on
school prayer
amendment
since 1971

Religious freedom in China gaining ground, clerics say

U.S. religious leaders returning from a trip to observe the status of religious freedom in China declared the trip a success because they were able to raise religious freedom issues directly with Chinese President Jiang Zemin.

The leaders, criticized by some for being too soft on Chinese officials, said that the trip could lead to an ongoing dialogue with the Chinese government about religious freedom, according to Religion News Service.

"It was the beginning of a process," said Rabbi Arthur Schneier, president of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation and one of the three delegates to China.

At a March 18 press conference in New York City, Schneier said, "Religion is now on the agenda of the top leaders of China."

Schneier, National Association of Evangelicals President Donald Argue and Roman Catholic Archbishop Theodore McCarrick of Newark, N.J., spent three weeks touring China on a trip that grew out of last year's Washington summit between Jiang and President Clinton.

The delegation was hand-picked by the White House, although it traveled on private foundation monies to underscore its independence.

The three said that religious persecution in China was well-documented and their visit had limited but important goals that may some day lead to greater freedom.

They visited six cities, including Lhasa in Chinese-occupied Tibet, and met with Jiang and other top Chinese officials. In addition, they gave Chinese officials a list of 30 religious leaders believed to be in jail or otherwise restricted because of their religious activities.

However, some China critics maintain that the delegation was used by both China and the White House to make it appear both were addressing the issue while in actuality doing little.

"In fact, they were manipulated in China by the official propaganda machine and treated to a Potemkin religious tour," said Nina Shea, director of Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom.

"Washington also used them to abdicate its responsibility by shifting the push for human rights to the sphere of citizen diplomacy while it gets on with the business of talking trade with China," she said.

Argue said, "I can assure you that we pressed (our) points very forcefully." He added, "We were not wallflowers. We

pressed the points with vigor."

In their report, the delegation said they pressed Chinese officials to end their insistence that religious groups receive government sanction or face a possible crackdown. They also urged Beijing to allow religious groups "to relate more fully" to international religious bodies. Δ

Supreme Court rejects Nativity scene dispute

The U.S. Supreme Court refused March 9 to hear a challenge to a Nativity scene displayed by the city of Syracuse, N.Y.

Left standing were two lower court decisions that the display did not violate the Constitution's requirement for separation of church and state.

The display was challenged by Carol A. Elewski, an atheist, in 1995.

Owned by the city, the display included statues of Jesus, Mary and Joseph; other figures; and a banner reading "Gloria in Excelsis Deo." It was located at the base of a 55-foot evergreen tree decorated with colored lights.

In upholding the display, the appeals court cited an array of non-religious holiday decorations in downtown Syracuse. It also noted that the city pays part of the cost of erecting, dismantling and lighting a privately owned menorah.

The 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals concluded that a "reasonable observer" would not see the Nativity display as an "endorsement of Christianity," but would perceive a "celebration of the diversity of the holiday season, including traditional religious and secular symbols of the season and that a principal purpose of that celebration was to preserve the economic viability of downtown retailers."

The court cited a 1989 Supreme Court decision that struck down a stand-alone creche on the main staircase of the Allegheny County, Pa., courthouse and a 1984 high court ruling that upheld a Pawtucket, R.I., Nativity scene that was only part of an otherwise secular holiday display.

In a dissenting opinion, Judge Jose A. Cabranes said the publicly sponsored religious display on public property "unavoidably signals to a reasonable observer public endorsement of religion."

Cabranes said Syracuse officials overlooked a "common-sense solution" of having such displays privately sponsored.

"The City opted, instead, for a much more direct and visible embrace of religion, and of one discrete religious traditions over others," Cabranes wrote. Δ

Quoting

Any interference by any official at any level is a violation of freedom of religion. I am not prepared to let the meddling hand of government at any level in any degree be placed on any man's altar. This resolution must be defeated.

— Former House Speaker
Carl Albert
D-Okla.

*speaking against a school
prayer amendment
pending on the House
floor in 1971*

Matters of the heart not to be trampled



James M. Dunn
Executive Director

The basic issue is simple: "Is there hope?"

As Chairman Aidsand Wright-Riggins III recently reminded his Baptist Joint Committee, "all our work is a matter of the heart." Robert N. Bellah, author of *Habits of the Heart*, so

affirmed at the annual meeting of the Society for Biblical Literature, Nov. 22, 1997, "the first Puritan who contained our whole destiny . . . is Roger Williams."

Bellah, quintessential scholar, argues that "what is so important about the Baptists, and other sectarians such as the Quakers, was the absolute centrality of religious freedom, of the sacredness of individual conscience."

Dr. Bellah quoted the "charming doggerel" of Roger Williams and his tribute to the Indians who with compassionate hearts brought him through the winter of 1636:

*"If nature's sons both wild and tame,
humane and courteous be,
How ill it becomes the sons of God to
want humanity."*

With the end-time buzz in these waning hours of the millennium, I'm reminded of William Faulkner's words as he received the 1950 Nobel Prize:

I decline to accept the end of man. It is easy enough to say that man is immortal simply because he will endure: that when the last ding dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last worthless rock hanging tideless in the last red and dying evening, that even then there will still be one more sound: that of his puny, inexhaustible voice still talking. I refuse to accept this. I believe that man will not merely endure: he will prevail. He is immortal, not because he alone among creatures has an inexhaustible voice, but because he has a soul, a spirit of compassion and sacrifice and endurance. The poet's, the writer's duty is to write about these things. It is

his privilege to help man endure by lifting up his heart (emphasis added), by reminding him of the courage and honor and hope and pride and compassion and pity and sacrifice which have been the glory of his past.

Matters of the heart: compassion, sacrifice, courage, honor, endurance, pride, pity and hope.

Compassion fuels fights for religious freedom for all. Because we love others we scream for them to have the same free choices we expect.

Sacrifice stretches our passion for the common school. We cannot greedily retreat from full support for public schools.

As long as one little scuffed-shoed, sticky-handed, sweat-scented, snotty-nosed kid counts on us, we'll oppose the diversion of tax dollars into private and parochial schools.

Courage says "NO" to the demands of demagogues. Any dilution of the clarion call of the First Amendment invites government into our hearts with her dirty boots on.

We must speak out against anything like the Istook scam which would promote regional religion, the right of local majorities to enforce their "voluntary" prayers.

Silliness!

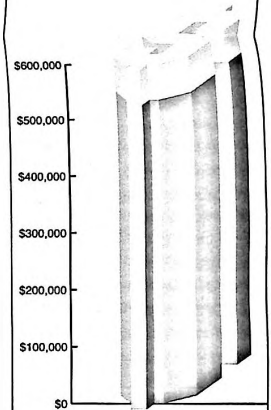
Freedom of conscience is the oldest right of humankind, a faculty which even God will not trample. God guarantees freedom from compulsion in matters of the heart and it's matters of the heart that matter.

How ludicrous for any ensconced member of Congress to suggest a pattern for public praying. How presumptuous for a few members of Congress to think in their hubris that they can find a formula for or set out the boundaries of religious expression. No congressional committee can tell us all how to pray. Trying to trump God? Shame!

If we believe in the sacredness of individual conscience and defend it with honor, pride and endurance, there is hope.

Keep hope alive. Δ

Endowing the Baptist Joint Committee



Endowment drive reaches \$535,500 mark

Recent gifts have pushed the total amount given and pledged to the Baptist Joint Committee's endowment drive to \$535,500. That is 89 percent of the \$600,000 goal.

Your gift will help secure a Baptist voice for religious freedom in the nation's capital.

Thanks.

Baptist Joint Committee

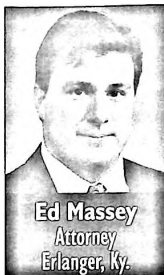
Supporting Bodies

- ◆ Alliance of Baptists
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- ◆ Baptist General Conference
- ◆ Cooperative Baptist Fellowship
- ◆ National Baptist Convention of America
- ◆ National Baptist Convention U.S.A. Inc.
- ◆ National Missionary Baptist Convention
- ◆ North American Baptist Conference
- ◆ 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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from religion as required in the First Amendment to our U.S. Constitution.

Even now, a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution is pending before Congress would allow government to hold on religious freedom. The Istook amendment, as it is called, threatens to change the constitutional language in such a way that would allow our government the opportunity to meddle in an area that has been constitutionally protected for more than 200 years.

On its face, the Istook amendment appears harmless. It even appears to defend religious freedom by prohibiting the establishment of a national religion. However, a close reading of the proposed amendment reveals that government would have the power to invoke organized school prayer so long as it did not establish a national religion. It would also allow government to endorse other religious messages and subsidize church missions and ministries. As a devout defender of religious liberty, I take the position that government intervention in any form into the area of religion threatens the historical heritage of religious freedom that is embedded within the language of our Constitution.

On March 2-3, a conference on reli-

In America today, government often involves itself in areas that threaten personal liberty. Nowhere is this more clear than in our own churches and schools. We must rise, as defenders of our many faiths, and demand that government stay separated

gious liberty sponsored by the Baptist Joint Committee, the Religious Liberty Council and Central Baptist Theological Seminary was held at Central's campus in Kansas City, Kan.

The conference was for the purpose of informing religious leaders about issues of religious liberty. Speakers covered a variety of topics on religious liberty, ranging from "political activity by churches" to "pitfalls to avoid as seen from the pulpit."

The conference was a tremendous educational experience both collectively and personally. Attendees were challenged to defend the religious freedom that was bestowed upon all Americans by our nation's.

I left the conference in Kansas with a renewed vitality and energy to carry the torch of religious liberty. I would encourage all readers to do the same. True liberty exists only if we all, individually, are allowed to choose what role religion will play in our lives. Δ

April 20-21 conference on pluralism postponed

A conference on pluralism titled *A Shared Vision: The Challenge of Pluralism for America's Religious and Political Communities* scheduled April 20-21, 1998, has been postponed. A new date for the conference, to be jointly sponsored by the American Jewish Committee, the Baptist Joint Committee and George Washington University, has not been set. Δ

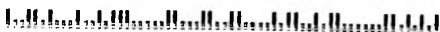


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