



REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

Volume 55, No. 5

March 7, 2000

NewsMakers

◆ **Joan Wood**, a medical examiner in Pasco and Pinellas counties in Florida, has declared a Scientistologist's death four years ago an accident after originally labeling it "undetermined." Church members checked **Lisa McPherson** out of a hospital following a minor traffic accident, fearing she would undergo psychiatric treatment in violation of church principles. McPherson died in their care. Wood's decision complicates a lawsuit in which state officials charge the church with unauthorized practice of medicine and abusing a disabled adult.

◆ **Sen. Orrin Hatch**, R-Utah, has introduced the Religious Liberty Protection Act. The bill was placed on the Senate calendar, effectively bypassing the committee process. An aide to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., said the Senate is not expected to take up the bill any time soon. Passed by the House last year, the bill would require state and local officials to have a compelling reason before interfering with religious practices.

◆ **House Speaker Dennis Hastert**, R-Ill., said government should partner with faith-based groups but noted that government should only fund the non-religious aspects of faith-based programs. He spoke at a press conference touting a bill designed to boost low-income communities. ▴

Injection of religion into politics proves divisive in campaigns

Regardless of who gets blamed for it, the injection of religion into political campaigns in a manipulative way has left most everyone displeased.

Vice President Al Gore received an endorsement from a pulpit during a worship service. It led a church-state organization to file a complaint about the church's tax-exempt status with the Internal Revenue Service.

In the Republican presidential battle, charges of religious bigotry are being levelled daily.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz., lashed out Feb. 28 at the "self-appointed" leaders of the religious right, calling them "agents of intolerance." He singled out Pat Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

Robertson, head of the Christian Coalition, has been criticized for a taped a phone message to South Carolina voters, calling one of McCain's top advisors a "vicious bigot." Meanwhile, religious conservative Gary Bauer, who has endorsed McCain, called on him to apologize for the attack on Robertson and Falwell.

McCain's campaign has been criticized for phone calls attempting to tie his main rival, Texas Gov. George W. Bush, to the anti-Catholic beliefs of Bob Jones University, where Bush spoke before the South Carolina primary. Bush apologized for not speaking out against the school's policies but has chided McCain for using religion to polarize voters.

Democratic lawmakers introduced a resolution Feb. 29 to condemn the university's practices that discriminate on the basis of race and religion. Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., said the resolution will not be considered.

House Republicans are still grappling with charges of an anti-Catholic bias generated by the nomination of a Protestant minister as chaplain, a position that has never been held by a Catholic.



"The big losers in this campaign are American voters and religion."

— Welton Gaddy

Commenting on McCain's remarks about Robertson and Falwell, Welton Gaddy, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, said that "voters do not need to take speculative detour into who is good or evil." But he criticized the Christian right for distributing voter guides slanted against McCain.

"The big losers in this campaign are American voters and religion," said Gaddy. "We caution against the identification of religion with any one political point of view." Gaddy, a Baptist minister, said that "candidates are manipulating religion for their own purposes, and tragically making religion a ballot issue rather than a matter of personal faith."

Gaddy said that when "religion becomes a political football, religion is hurt and government is hurt."

He said campaigns grow more uncivil as races tighten. Gaddy added that voters should be wary of candidates who "use religion to build support or suggest an opponent is less than religious." ▴

U.N., Iraq divided over financing of pilgrimage

Iraq has turned down a United Nations proposal to help finance an annual pilgrimage to Mecca for Iraqi Muslims.

Secretary-General Kofi Annan's proposal would have allocated about \$50 million — roughly \$2,000 per person — to help defray travel costs for the expected 24,700 Iraqi pilgrims traveling to Muslim holy sites in Saudi Arabia.

His proposal would avoid violating U.N. sanctions against Baghdad by allowing the United Nations — instead of Iraq — to oversee disbursement of the money.

The Security Council excluded hajj pilgrimages from economic sanctions that were imposed on Baghdad after Iraq's attack on Kuwait in 1990. In recent years the council has tried to use revenue generated from the United Nations' "oil-for-food" program — which allows Iraq to sell oil in exchange for food and medicine for its population — to help Iraqis make the journey to Saudi Arabia. But the council's efforts have failed as it remains deadlocked with Baghdad over the issue of who will disperse the pilgrimage money.

The Security Council refuses to accede to Baghdad's demands to transfer the entire \$50 million into Iraq's Central Bank, contending that doing so would violate economic sanctions.

Baghdad maintains Annan's plans violate the country's sovereignty. Δ

Oregon council lifts some limits on church ministry

The Portland, Ore., City Council voted unanimously March 1 to overturn an attendance limit put on a United Methodist church whose feeding program for the poor has sparked controversy.

The weekly meals program at Sunny-side Centenary United Methodist Church also has been preserved — with conditions — by the council.

The attendance limit had drawn attention from many concerned about constitutional issues involving government entanglement with religion.

"It was a dumb mistake," City Commissioner Charlie Hales said about the January decision by city hearings officer Elizabeth Normand. "It's not a legal issue. It's a common-sense issue."

Normand's ruling had placed an attendance limit of 70 people for worship services. It also placed conditions on the operation of the church's nighttime shelter, day-care center and Indochinese Socialization Center.

"We are not saying this population should not be served," said neighbor Lisa Long. "We are saying this population should not be served across from our public park and our elementary school."

The church presented a plan to address concerns of the neighbors and the council used it as the basis for negotiations between church members and residents.

The plan calls for the church to provide access to its key church contacts and decision-makers, enforce zero tolerance of disruptive behavior, increase volunteer foot patrols around the neighborhood during the meals program and develop guidelines for providing services to poor and transient people. Δ

Christian Coalition lawsuit disputes IRS tax ruling

The Christian Coalition has sued the Internal Revenue Service, claiming the federal agency discriminated against the organization by denying it tax-exempt status.

The complaint, filed by the American Center for Law and Justice, founded by television broadcaster Pat Robertson, charges the IRS gave "disparate treatment" to the coalition's application for tax-exempt status compared to "liberal" groups engaged in similar activities.

Jay Sekulow, the ACLJ's chief counsel, said that "the IRS has singled out the Christian Coalition and engaged in dis-

crimatory action against the coalition because of the organization's political views." The IRS has wrongly collected taxes, he said, "and through its discriminatory practices has violated the First Amendment rights of the Christian Coalition."

The IRS made a final determination last year to reject the coalition's request for tax-exempt status. Δ

Religious freedom panel denounces Iranian actions

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom called Feb. 24 for the State Department and the United Nations to condemn Iran's persecution of members of the Baha'i faith.

According to the commission, a revolutionary court in Mashhad three times has sentenced three Baha'is to death for unspecified anti-security acts. Iran's Supreme Court overturned the convictions in the first two rounds but has not overturned the third convictions for the three.

According to the commission and reports filed by The Associated Press, two of the men were arrested in 1997 for holding monthly Baha'i "family life" meetings and have been imprisoned ever since. Another man arrested last year was also tried. The final 20-day window for appeals expired Feb. 23. Δ

Jewish group criticizes Kentucky education bill

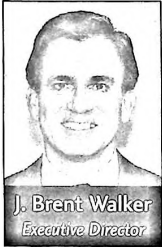
Labeling the bill an attempt to "aggravate Christianity at the expense of other faiths," the American Jewish Congress denounced a bill passed by the Kentucky Senate that would delete all religions except Christianity from history lessons about America's colonial era.

"It would not do to conjure up Jews or Muslims on the Mayflower so that history would promote current notions of diversity," said the AJC. "No more can a legislator by fiat excise from American colonial history the contributions of other faiths."

The bill, approved by a 37-1 vote on Feb. 15, was sponsored by Republican Sen. Albert Robinson, and urges the Kentucky board of education to stop the "suppression and censorship" of "Christianity's influence on colonial America."

"When the boat came to these great shores, it did not have an atheist, a Buddhist, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Christian and a Jew," he said. "Ninety-eight plus percent of these people were Christians." Δ

Expect religion to get soiled in the muddy world of politics



The Baptist Joint Committee has never believed that the public square is or should be stripped of religion. We hastily follow our call for the separation of church and state with the qualification that separation does not wall off religion

from politics. We must reaffirm this principle with special vigor during election season.

It would be wrong to require candidates to doff their religious convictions when they hit the campaign trail. Religious convictions inevitably influence candidates' positions on public policy and inform how they would lead in public office. Such convictions are an integral part of who they are.

The constitutional ban on a religious test for public office means only that a candidate cannot legally be disabled from running on the basis of religion. It does not mean that one's religion is irrelevant to the political process. And voters are entitled to know about candidates' core values and to take religion into account when they enter the voting booth.

Anyone who seriously argues that we have a "naked" public square has been living on Mars, or maybe in Sweden. When Baptist Jimmy Carter announced in 1976 that he was "born again," the Washington press corps responded with the befuddled incredulity of Nicodemus: "How can anyone enter a second time into the mother's womb?" Later, the Baptist Joint Committee's Barry Garrett went to the White House briefing room to "splain" the Baptist view of baptism. But over the last quarter century, God-talk increasingly has saturated our public discourse in political campaigns.

Like any good thing, it can be overdone. Not only is the public square no longer naked, it is dressed to the nines. A healthful public discussion of religion has almost turned into a *de facto* religious test for public office and religion is often used as a cudgel for partisan advantage.

◆ George W., in response to a question posed during a debate, says Jesus is his favorite "political philosopher." The Son of God had a lot to say about the Kingdom of God, but almost nothing about political philosophy. The cynic would say that he was determined to invoke the name of Jesus and figured the question about political philosophy was close enough.

◆ Al Gore says that his ethical compass is directed by "what would Jesus do?" Fair enough, but what does that mean? Contrary to Gore's endorsement of "Charitable Choice," we know that Jesus did not ask Caesar to pay for his ministry to the poor.

◆ Pat Robertson lambasts John McCain for selecting as his campaign chairman, former Sen. Warren Rudman, a Jew, who preacher Pat called a "vicious bigot" for speaking out against the policy positions of the religious right. McCain responds with a bombastic broadside against Robertson and Jerry Falwell.

◆ Congressman Lindsey Graham, however, is sure that the hand of God rescued then-Lieutenant Commander McCain from certain death as a POW in the Hanoi Hilton so that he could be elected president of the United States. OK, so maybe God did intervene to save him, but how can Rep. Graham be so sure about the mind and ways of God?

◆ Sen. Robert Torricelli introduces a resolution condemning the views of Bob Jones University — a private, non-tax-exempt institution. One can profoundly disagree with Bob Jones University — as I do — and still recoil at a government body's attempt to denounce any group's religious views.

Yes, we have come a long way since 1976; maybe we have overshot the mark.

The lesson is clear that rather than elevating the tone of political debate, religion often becomes cheapened and besmirched. When religion is dragged through the mud of a political campaign, no one should be surprised when it gets soiled. Δ

Quoting

Portraying America as a "Christian nation" violates the American commitment to both democratic government and religious liberty. Where religion is concerned, no person should be made to feel an outcast in his or her own land.

Accordingly we must:

- ◆ Defend the right of religious individuals and organizations to speak, debate and advocate openly in the public square;

- ◆ Stand firm by the principle that government action with a primary purpose or effect that advances religion violates the separation of church and state.

Similarly, we should:

- ◆ Discourage efforts to make a candidate's religious affiliation or nonaffiliation a campaign issue;
- ◆ Discourage candidates from invoking divine authority for their policies and platforms or from characterizing their opponents as sinful or ungodly.

— A Shared Vision:
Religious Liberty
in the 21st Century

Baptist Joint Committee

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- ◆ 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
- ◆ 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

J. Brent Walker
Executive Director
Larry Chesser
Editor
Kenny Byrd
Associate Editor

REPORT from the CAPITAL (ISSN-0346-0661) is published 24 times each year by the Baptist Joint Committee. Single subscriptions, \$10 per year. Bulk subscriptions available.

1999 State Department report lists religious freedom abuses

Violations of religious liberty, including religious persecution, are not confined to one country, religion or nationality, according to the U.S. State Department's 1999 Country Reports on Human Rights Practices.

"Throughout the world, Baha'is, Buddhists, Christians, Hindus, Jews, Muslims, and other believers continue to suffer for their faith," the report states.

The lengthy country-by-country analysis of human rights issues was released Feb. 25. The report focuses on democracy, human rights, religious liberty and labor.

Harold Koh, assistant secretary of state for Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, noted a growing U.S. emphasis on human rights. In 1977, the State Department's first human rights report ran only 137 pages and covered only a fraction of the world's countries. The latest report covers 194 countries and totals 6,000 pages of type-script.

"Too much of the world's population still lives in countries in which religious freedom is restricted or prohibited," the report's introduction states. "Totalitarian and authoritarian regimes remain determined to control religious belief and practice."

The report notes that some governments are hostile to minority religions while others tolerate, and thus, encourage persecution and discrimination. Some countries favor certain religions and disfavor others, and some democratic states have "indiscriminately identified minority religions as dangerous 'sects' or 'cults,'" the report states.

Among the religious freedom abuses cited in the report:

◆ In Burma, the government has imprisoned Buddhist monks who promote human and political rights. Security forces have destroyed and looted churches, mosques and Buddhist monasteries and have used coercive measures to induce Christians to convert to Buddhism.

◆ China has continued to restrict religious freedom and intensified controls on some unregistered churches. Unapproved groups, including Protestants and Catholics, experienced varying degrees of interference, repression and persecution.

◆ In Xinjiang, the government reportedly detained tens of thousands of Falun Gong members in outdoor stadiums and forced them to sign statements disavowing Falun Gong before releasing them.

◆ In Tibet, the government intensified its "patriotic education campaign" designed to increase pressures on Tibetan Buddhists and control the monasteries and expel supporters of the Dalai Lama.

◆ In Iran, Baha'is and other religious minorities are targeted by conservative judicial and security authorities. In February and March, 13 Jews were arrested on suspicion of espionage on behalf of Israel.

◆ In Iraq, the government "has conducted a campaign of murder, summary execution and protracted arbitrary arrest against the religious leaders and adherents of the Shi'a Muslim population," the report states.

◆ In Sudan, discrimination and violence against religious minorities has continued. "Eyewitnesses reported aerial bombardments of Christians, Muslims, and animists in the Nuba Mountains," the report states.

Among other countries cited for religious freedom violations in the report are Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, Uzbekistan and Vietnam. Δ



**BAPTIST
JOINT
COMMITTEE**

200 Maryland Ave. N.E.
Washington, D.C. 20002-5797
202-544-4226
Fax: 202-544-2094
E-mail: bjcpa@bjcpa.org
Web site: www.bjcpa.org

Non-profit Org.
U.S. Postage
PAID
Riverdale, MD
Permit No. 5061



AUTO**ALL FOR AADC

BILL SUMMERS
901 COMMERCE ST STE 400
NASHVILLE TN 37203-3630