



REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

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NewsMakers

◆ **Brandon Jones** of Pascagoula, Miss., and **Nick Stepp** of Big Stone Gap, Va., have begun fall internships at the Baptist Joint Committee. Jones is in his second year of study at Wake Forest University Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C. Stepp is a senior math and religion major at Carson-Newman College in Jefferson City, Tenn.

◆ **Ginger Strivelli**, leader of the Appalachian Pagan Alliance, said her group will cast blessing spells asking for acceptance and call for healing of the earth at a planned "We Still Work Magic" rally at an Asheville, N.C., high school on Sept. 22. This comes on the heels of a "We Still Pray" Christian rally at an Asheville high school stadium to protest the U.S. Supreme Court ban on public school-sponsored prayer before football games.

◆ **Sen. Joseph Lieberman**, Democratic vice presidential nominee, speaking to a congregation in Detroit, challenged the notion of a strict separation between church and state, saying, "the Constitution guarantees freedom of religion, not freedom from religion."

◆ **Brenda Girton-Mitchell**, a lawyer and a Baptist lay leader, has been nominated as associate general secretary for public policy of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the USA. Δ

Poll shows declining support for private school vouchers

Support for school vouchers is waning, with a growing majority of Americans opposing the use of public funds to pay tuition at private schools, according to a recent survey.

Americans believe the biggest problem facing the nation's public schools is inadequate funding, according to poll results released Aug. 21. Phi Delta Kappa, a professional education organization, conducted the survey in conjunction with the Gallup Organization, a polling firm based in Princeton, N.J.

The survey of 1,093 adults interviewed in June showed a continuing decline in support for allowing students to choose a private school to attend at public expense. This year, 56 percent of those surveyed oppose private school attendance at public expense, compared with 39 percent who favor the idea. Only 24 percent favored such a choice when this question was first asked in 1993, but support climbed to 44 percent in 1998 before falling off during the past two years.

Fifty-two percent of those surveyed said they oppose "allowing parents to send their children to a private, or church-related school with the government paying all or part of the tuition." Meanwhile, 45 percent favor school

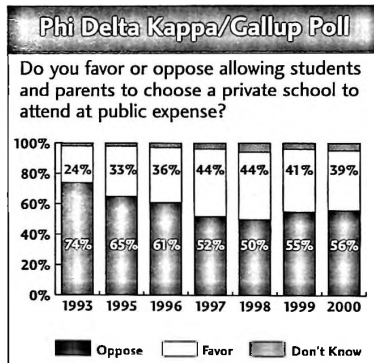
vouchers, according to the survey. Those figures are reversed from last year's survey, in which 51 percent supported and 47 percent opposed vouchers.

More than three-fourths (76 percent) said if private or church-related schools accept funds from the government, they should be accountable to the state in the same way as public schools.

Most respondents remain in favor of reforming the existing school system rather than creating an alternative system. But the percentage in favor of reforming public schools slipped from 71 percent in 1999 to 59 percent this year.

However, when asked to choose between "improving and strengthening the existing public schools or providing vouchers for parents to use in selecting and paying for private and/or church-related schools," 75 percent of respondents said they would rather improve public schools.

"The respondents to both questions this year make it clear that a majority of the public expects improvement in student achievement to come through the public schools," Lowell Rose and Alec Gallup wrote in a summary of the 32nd



Appeals court rejects request to halt Virginia's minute of silence

A federal appeals court refused to stop a new minute-of-silence statute from being implemented in Virginia public schools.

The 4th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in Richmond upheld a district judge's refusal to grant the request of the American Civil Liberties Union to halt the observance.

The 2-1 appellate decision meant the law would stay in effect at least until Sept. 8, when U.S. District Judge Claude M. Hilton had scheduled a hearing to determine its constitutionality.

The law, which became effective July 1, mandates every public school to hold a minute of silence during which students may "meditate, pray or engage in any other silent activity." Previously, state law permitted but did not require schools to observe a minute of silence.

The ACLU, which believes the inclusion of the option of prayer violates the First Amendment, remained optimistic after the appellate decision.

"We still think we have a good case - that the facts are on our side, and the law is on our side," said Kent Willis, executive director of the Virginia ACLU.

Virginia Attorney General Mark L. Earley issued a statement voicing his pleasure with the appeals court's ruling.

"There is nothing to fear from a classroom of silent, thoughtful children," he said. Δ

State Department report lists same religious liberty violators

Making no changes to its 1999 "countries of particular concern" list, the State Department again named Burma, China, Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Serbia and the Taliban of Afghanistan as severe violators of religious freedom.

Robert Seiple, ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom at the State Department, listed the violators Sept. 7, two days after the department released its second annual report on global religious freedom mandated under a 1998 law.

The law now gives the president 90 days to take action against those countries or explain to Congress reasons for not imposing penalties. Theoretically, the president could also delay action for another 90 days, well past his term in office.

The refusal this year to add any additional "countries of particular concern" (CPCs) came under sharp criticism from a 10-member independent commission also created under the two-year-old law. The commission's role is merely to advise the administration and Congress, giving it no power to sanction countries found to be harsh toward religious liberty.

Seiple and members of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom testified before House and Senate foreign relations panels Sept. 7.

In the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, attended by one senator, Seiple said the act establishes a "very high standard" for CPC designation. A country must have engaged in or tolerated "systematic, ongoing, egregious violations of religious freedom accompanied by flagrant denials of the right to life, liberty and security of persons, such as torture, enforced and arbitrary disappearances, or arbitrary prolonged detention."

Seiple said the same seven countries listed last year merit the status again, but added, "After carefully reviewing these records, I have concluded that no other countries reach that standard." Secretary of State Madeleine Albright approved Seiple's recommendations, he said.

However, Firuz Kazemzadeh, vice chair of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, said the panel was disappointed that its advice to include four other countries was not heeded. The commission believes Laos, North Korea, Saudi Arabia and Turkmenistan should have been added to the list.

Speaking for the commission, Kazemzadeh generally applauded the State De-

partment's report and increased focus on religious freedom in foreign policy. The State Department has incorporated many of the commission's suggestions, he said.

But he criticized the State Department report for "labeling what are really positive developments ... as improvements," confusing "positive steps with real and fundamental progress in eliminating religious persecution."

Seiple addressed the State Department's disagreement with the commission over listing the four additional countries. "In each case, we had diplomacy working," he told Associated Baptist Press.

"We had some significant breakthroughs, for instance in Laos, with prisoners being released," Seiple continued. "And when we talked to some of our sources of information, we were told that if we were to make such designations, it would set back the spirit of the law. It would be more difficult for people to worship not less difficult."

Seiple, who is leaving the State Department office next week, told Sen. Sam Brownback, R-Kan., in testimony that "When all is said and done, our work will be judged not by the denunciations we make or the sanctions we impose, but by the people we help."

The commission has also been critical of the administration's support and House approval of permanent normal trade relations (PNTR) with China because of religious freedom abuses. The Senate is set to vote on PNTR in the next few weeks.

The Sept. 5 State Department report said respect for religious freedom in China has "deteriorated" over the past year.

The release of the report was moved from Washington, D.C., to New York City to coincide with the U.N. Millennium Summit. It cited Afghanistan, Burma, China, Cuba, Laos, North Korea and Vietnam as having regimes in place with totalitarian or authoritarian attempts to control religious beliefs.

The report also found that countries such as Austria, Belgium, France and Germany "stigmatize" certain religions by "wrongfully associating them with dangerous cults or sects."

"Every country has its own unique political and legal system. In our report, we do our utmost to be fair and respectful to other cultures," said Albright at the report's release. "But no country's history or culture can exempt it from the need to respect principles of religious freedom enshrined in the Universal Declaration [of Human Rights]." Δ

Public prayer at football games: What would Jesus do?



Since the Supreme Court ruled in June in *Doe vs. Santa Fe* that public schools could not sponsor stadium prayers at football games, groups have formed with names such as "We Will Pray" and "No

Pray/No Play." These groups and others have been busy organizing fans to say the Lord's Prayer in unison during moments of silence. They claim that the schools have not participated in any way in their plans, and the schools insist that they are simply overseeing a neutral moment of silence, not encouraging prayer.

"No Pray/No Play," for example, urged thousands of Christians to travel to Santa Fe, Texas, for the first home game of the season to participate in this exercise. In describing plans for the Santa Fe game, its website states: "The national media will be present to broadcast the thousands of Christians gathered to pray after the National Anthem and your presence, even if you cannot get into the stadium will send a strong message to our nation's leaders."

From a legal standpoint, this practice is permissible as long as the school isn't involved in encouraging prayer. As long as that is true, fans would be practicing their right to free speech which is protected under the First Amendment.

From a practical standpoint, one might ask how this plan will work when other faith groups decide to use the moment of silence to say their prayers in unison. In other words, will this work for the Methodists and the Muslims, members of the Seventh-day Adventist and Santeria faiths? One could also legitimately ask if God would be pleased with the "prayer wars" that might result. Prayers should always be offered in a spirit of love for

one's neighbor and not in the spirit of "we're No. 1, can't be No. 2 and we're going to roll all over you."

This brings me to the most important question, which is another theological one. Put simply, what would Jesus do?

The "No Pray/No Play" website contains a list of Bible verses and urges Christians to memorize these verses and defend their faith. But the list does not include a most relevant biblical passage, Jesus' statement on public prayer from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus said: "And whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to stand and pray in synagogues and at street corners so that they may be seen by others. Truly, I tell you, they have received their reward. But whenever you pray, go into your room and shut the door and pray to your Father who is in secret and your Father who sees in secret will reward you." (Matthew 6:5) Christians must decide how this verse applies to this situation.

Most don't read these verses literally. In other words, I don't know any church that bars prayers from the pulpit. But you don't have to read these verses literally for them to give you pause.

It seems to me that Jesus was speaking to the spirit in which we pray. To me, this passage means that if we are praying to be seen by others, we're in trouble.

So whenever we pray in a manner that draws attention to us, the burden is on us to ensure that we aren't crossing the line. The hotter the spotlight, the heavier the burden. We must always ask ourselves if our hearts are pure.

This is a question that only the individual can answer for himself or herself. As with all of our lives, God will know if we have searched our hearts honestly and lived faithfully. Δ

Alabama churches challenged to support schools

Some Alabama Baptist churches are taking up a challenge from a fellow Baptist to help the state's schools after churches played a key role in defeating an education lottery last year.

Wayne Flynt, an Auburn University historian, issued the challenge earlier this summer in a column published on several Alabama newspaper editorial pages.

Flynt, a long-time critic of what he contends is a dysfunctional state government, said it's time for Alabama's evangelical Christians, who opposed Gov. Don Siegelman's proposed lottery to support education, to "put their money where their mouths were."

Flynt asked all 5,000 churches, synagogues and other religious institutions throughout Alabama to "voluntarily give up your tax exemption" to provide money for public schools.

Flynt's own church, Auburn First Baptist, is leading the way. The church's members have voted to give Auburn schools money equal to the church's property tax assessment.

"Most of the anti-lottery leaders kept saying there was a better way to support public schools than the lottery," Flynt said. "(But) in the ensuing six months since the lottery was defeated, I concluded that evangelicals were not going to do anything. I got tired of all the pious talking and no acting, so this seemed like the perfect opportunity to call their bluff." Δ

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
- ◆ 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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annual Phi Delta Kappa/Gallup Poll.

Baptist Joint Committee Executive Director Brent Walker said the survey "indicates that the American public is seeing through the misguided arguments of the pro-voucher forces."

Walker added, "A growing majority understands that we cannot improve public schools by draining dollars away from them into the coffers of parochial schools."

Walker said it is "simply wrong" to use tax dollars for religious education.

"Parents should be able to choose to send their kids to parochial schools, but they have no right to expect taxpayers to help them pay for it," he said.

In a question new to this year's poll, respondents indicated that parents have a greater effect than schools, teachers or students themselves on student achievement. Fifty-three percent of respondents indicated parents had the greatest responsibility, with teachers drawing 26 percent of the responses.

"These findings may go a long way toward explaining why the public does not seem inclined to blame the public

schools when students have difficulty achieving satisfactory levels of learning," the pollsters wrote in a summary.

In another line of questioning unique to this year's survey, randomly selected Americans were asked about school

improvement and the political parties. When asked which of the political parties is more interested in improving public education in this country, 41 percent of respondents answered the Democrats, compared with 29 percent for the Republicans.

If compelled to vote "solely on a desire to strengthen public schools," however, respondents were split between presidential candidates George W. Bush (38 percent) and Al Gore (37 percent).

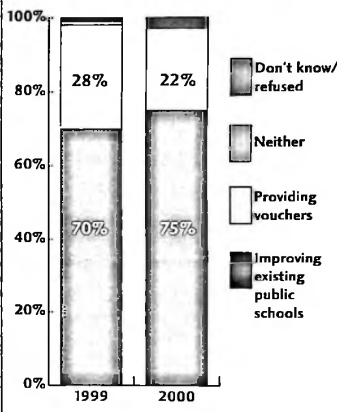
Forty-four percent of respondents said "knowing that a candidate for national office supports vouchers for parents to use to pay for private schools" would make them

less likely to vote for a candidate. Forty-one percent indicated it would make them more likely to vote for the candidate.

— Jeff Huett
BJC Intern

PDK/Gallup Poll

Which one of these two plans would you prefer — improving and strengthening the existing public schools or providing vouchers for parents to use in selecting and paying for private and/or church-related schools?



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