

Nashville, Tennessee



REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

Volume 55, No. 19

September 26, 2000

NewsMakers

◆ On Sept. 14, Venkatachalapathi Samuldrala became the first Hindu to offer the morning prayer at the U.S. House of Representatives. House Chaplain Daniel P. Coughlin tapped the Hindu priest to offer the prayer after he was nominated by Rep. Sherrod Brown, D-Ohio. Brown said he requested the prayer by Samuldrala to coincide with the special joint session address by Indian Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee.

◆ The U.S. State Department asked China to immediately release Zeng Jingmu, a Roman Catholic bishop recently arrested for unauthorized religious activities. "The persecution of an 81-year-old clergyman who has already spent more than 30 years in prison is unacceptable and violates commitments China has made under international human rights covenants," the State Department said in a statement, The Associated Press reported.

◆ Louis Owen, a Jewish teacher in a Michigan school district, is receiving help from the Clinton administration in his claim against the district. Owen says he was the victim of anti-Semitic harassment and threats of violence in his classroom. The Justice Department said the school did not "reasonably" or "appropriately" address Owen's concerns to keep him free from religious harassment. A

Tax funds for religious ministries a continuing trend in legislation

As the 106th Congress comes to a close and negotiations over spending bills heat up, lawmakers are continuing to attach "charitable choice" provisions to spending bills.

Charitable Choice — first enacted in the 1996 welfare reform package — would make thoroughly religious organizations, such as churches, eligible for tax dollars to fund juvenile programs, drug rehabilitation services and other social programs.

Charitable choice has been added to two major pieces of legislation in the past few weeks, but supporters are looking to get the initiative placed into law by attaching it to the spending bills that must be hammered out by October to prevent a government shutdown.

Critics of the plan include church-state separation supporters who assert that the funding scheme is unconstitutional and threatens churches with government regulations. But the measure has bipartisan support in Congress and is supported by both leading presidential contenders. Also, President Bill Clinton signed the provision into law in the welfare reforms of 1996 and has supported the initiative in a recent bipartisan agreement with GOP leaders to boost low-income communities.

"The political opposition to this idea is not that strong, and the support is bipartisan," said Rob Boston, a spokesman for

Americans United for Separation of Church and State. "More and more we are coming to the conclusion that this battle will have to move into the courts," he added.

While religious conservative advocates are pushing the plan, Americans

United and several religious and civil liberties groups have signed a letter opposing charitable choice. Signers include the American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, Baptist Joint Committee, National PTA, People For the American Way, National Gay and Lesbian Task Force and others.

Rep. Bobby Scott, D-Va., touted the letter from the floor of the House of Representatives in an unsuccessful attempt to amend the charitable choice initiative in the Child Support Distribution Act. Scott's proposed changes failed and Congress overwhelmingly approved the child support bill Sept. 7. The charitable choice initiative was also attached to an Even Start bill, a measure designed to boost children's literacy approved Sept. 12.

Scott's amendment would have required that social service beneficiaries in tax-funded programs not be subjected to sectarian worship and instruction or proselytization. He told lawmakers that the charitable choice initiative only pro-



*Charitable choice
"turns the clock
back on civil
rights laws."*

- U.S. Rep.
Bobby Scott

Religious leaders ask for extension on visa program

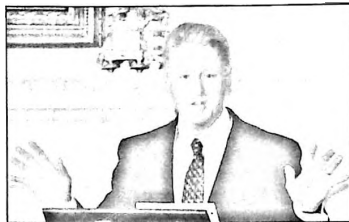
A coalition of Jewish, Catholic and Protestant religious leaders has asked Congress to extend permanently a visa program that allows foreign missionaries to enter the country on a short-term basis.

The provision, passed originally as part of a 1990 immigration bill, has been reauthorized twice but will die Oct. 1 unless Congress votes to extend the program. The "Mother Teresa Religious Worker Act of 1999" would extend a program that allows up to 5,000 foreign religious workers to enter the United States each year on short-term projects.

In a Sept. 6 letter to members of Congress, nine religious leaders said U.S. churches and synagogues need these foreign missionaries, and their work benefits U.S. citizens, sometimes taking the place of government social service programs.

"Failure to extend it permanently would substantially undermine the services that religious denominations and organizations in the United States provide to their members and communities," the letter said.

The religious leaders said these "non-minister special immigrant" workers are needed to work in communities, care for the sick, work with troubled families and assimilate new immigrants. Δ



President Bill Clinton talks to religious leaders at the White House on Sept. 14.

Clinton holds last White House breakfast with religious leaders

In his annual breakfast meeting with religious leaders Sept. 14, President Bill Clinton urged the group to promote debt relief for the poorest countries of the world.

At previous breakfasts with religious leaders, Clinton has addressed issues ranging from race relations to personal confessions about sins and sexual impropriety.

This year, Clinton addressed about 125 pastors, rabbis, priests and others in the East Room of the White House.

Before fielding questions from the religious leaders, Clinton pleaded for help from the religious community on global justice issues, including more money to combat HIV/AIDS in Africa, support for meals programs in poor countries and debt relief.

"How can we sit here on the biggest mountain of wealth we have ever accumulated, that any nation in all of human history has ever accumulated?" Clinton asked. "And we're not just throwing money away; we're only giving this money to people who not only promise to, but prove they are able to take all of the savings and invest it in the human needs of their people."

The president said, "We have reaped great benefits from the information revolution and the globalization of the economy. We, therefore, have great responsibilities. We have responsibilities to put a human face on the global economy."

Sitting at the table with Clinton and about eight others was Daniel Vestal, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship coordinator.

Vestal told Associated Baptist Press it was "an inspiring experience to be in the White House ... and there is the president of the United States, who is obviously a

person of faith and a committed Christian." It was a "reminder to me," Vestal noted, "of the diversity of this country and how important liberty is, how important faith is."

Also present at the breakfast was Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee.

Walker said the eight gatherings the president has hosted for religious leaders have been "instrumental in bringing people of various faiths together to discuss important public policy issues, to get to know one another and to establish common ground despite their differences. I hope whoever is elected in November continues the meetings." Δ

China PNTR trade status passes despite religious freedom report

Legislation permanently normalizing trade with China passed overwhelmingly in the Senate Sept. 19, just two weeks after a U.S. State Department report cited a "deterioration" in the Chinese government's respect for religious freedom.

The measure grants permanent normal trade relations to China, the same trade rights the United States provides any of its "most favored" trading partners. The House passed the legislation with a 237-197 vote on May 24.

Passage of the bill 83-15 by the Senate will prevent the annual review of the trade status for China, which often raises the human rights issues.

Incidents of human rights and religious freedom violations made some lawmakers and religious leaders leery of granting such a privilege to the nation.

For the second year in a row, the State Department has placed China on its list of "countries of particular concern" for its violations of religious freedom.

Normalized trade with China drew opposition from individuals and groups representing various views on the political spectrum — from former Republican presidential hopeful Gary Bauer to Sen. Paul Wellstone, D-Minn.

Wellstone introduced three amendments to a bill granting PNTR to China, none of which were approved by the Senate. The amendments would have postponed the effective date of PNTR for China until the country's government improved on a series of religious freedom and human rights issues.

"The question is not whether we inte-

'See You at the Pole' gatherings provide great chance for prayer



As I write this column, millions of students all over America, indeed throughout the world, are attending "See You at the Pole" prayer meetings in public as well as private schools.

First begun by Texas Baptists, but now garnering participation by students of many denominational traditions, "See You at the Pole" has spread like wildfire through the past 10 years.

It is important to highlight this program because it provides an example of how students can properly engage in religious exercises, even in the public schools.

The football game prayer over the public address system struck down in *Santa Fe vs. Doe* demonstrates the wrong way to do it. That prayer was saturated with state sponsorship. But, as the Supreme Court itself pointed out, "nothing in the Constitution as interpreted by this Court prohibits any public school student from voluntarily praying at any time, before, during, or after the schoolday." "See You at the Pole" prayer meetings — along with Bible clubs, prayer before meals and tests and silently throughout the day and neutral moments of silence — provide ample opportunity for students to communicate with God while at school.

It is important, however, to understand some areas of concern and possible pitfalls.

First, public school teachers and administrators should not participate. As recognized in *Religion in the Public Schools: A Joint Statement of Current Law*, "School officials acting in an official capacity, may neither discourage nor encourage participation in [See You at the Pole]." This means that the school officials should not give those wishing to pray at the pole any special advantage or treat them more favorably than any student speakers. By the same token, they should not discourage or put unreasonable impediments in the way of this religious practice. In short,

school officials should remain neutral and allow students to run the program.

Second, parents should not join in the prayer circle. These are to be student-initiated, student-run prayer gatherings. Attempts on the part of parents to participate directly can be problematic, and many schools ask parents to stay away. However, this doesn't mean parents can't be involved. For example, in my home church, Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va., parents of school-aged children meet at the church the hour following the meeting on campus and pray together for their children, other students and the school.

Third, students should strive to model their piety through their behavior. Administrators and other students will be watching. Participating students must respect the rights of others to disagree with them and not participate. Others should not be put down for failing to join the group or aggressively proselytized or rudely hectoring.

Moreover, student leaders should inform the school administration about their plans for the prayer meeting and accept reasonable time, place and manner limitations on their meeting. School officials are not allowed to prohibit the meeting, but they can impose reasonable guidelines. For example, if the flagpole is near a bus lane and 200 students want to crowd around the pole to pray, the school would be justified in moving the prayer meeting from the flagpole to a safer area of campus.

Finally, students should avoid being lulled into a civil religion trap. Joining hands in a circle facing the quintessential symbol of our country, the American Flag, makes this a real risk. Yes, we are told in scriptures to pray for our leaders. Students should understand they are not praying to Caesar, but to God.

In sum, there are so many ways to do this right. "See You at the Pole," when properly done, is one of the best. We don't need, and should not want, the government's help in our religious activities. Let the students pray, but let the government keep out of it. Δ

Religious media seeks legislation protecting speech

The National Religious Broadcasters and 25 other groups have written to Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., asking him to push legislation that would protect Christian broadcasters from future Federal Communications Commission decisions restricting religious speech.

"We ... believe that today religious broadcasters remain vulnerable to the whims of the Federal Communications Commission, an agency that has revealed its willingness to ignore our fundamental liberties of religious expression and free speech by attempting to place onerous restrictions specifically targeting religious programming on noncommercial TV channels," the letter said.

The letter referred to a 1999 FCC guideline declaring some religious programs aired on noncommercial television could not be considered "educational." In January 2000, the agency reversed its decision and dropped the language.

The House passed a bill in June barring the FCC from regulating the content of speech aired by noncommercial educational television and radio stations.

National Religious Broadcasters President Brandt Gustavson and other signatories urged Lott to act quickly to pass a Senate version of the bill. Δ

Supporting Bodies

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Ensuring that government dollars are not used for religious instruction will require the very strings the First Amendment is designed to prevent, Edwards said. It will either require "the federal government to not be accountable for how those dollars are spent or to actually have the federal government go in and audit the books of churches and synagogues and houses of worship," he added.

PNTR, continued from Page 2

The vote represents a victory for the Clinton administration, Republican leaders and the business community over labor unions, human rights advocates, defense hard-liners and many liberal Democrats in Congress.