

Nashville, Tennessee



REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

Volume 55, No. 22

November 7, 2000

NewsMakers

◆ Former President Jimmy Carter, who recently announced that he could no longer be associated with the Southern Baptist Convention, said the group's leaders "are increasingly imposing a creed on a denomination who's very founding was based on a commitment against creeds." Carter, 76, said he would continue as a Baptist deacon and Sunday school teacher at Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga. (See Letter Page 4)

◆ Rep. Tom Lantos, D-Calif., sponsored a nonbinding resolution approved Oct. 24 in the House condemning the "assassinations" of human rights workers in Kenya and calling for an investigation of the shooting death of a Minnesota-born priest working in the east African nation. The resolution asks the State Department to produce a report assessing the progress of Kenyan authorities' investigation into the death of the Rev. John Kaiser. A missionary in Kenya for 36 years, Kaiser was an outspoken critic of the Kenyan government.

◆ Amy Sherman of Charlottesville, Va., speaking at a Faith in Action conference about the need for congregations to do more to meet community social needs, said, "the Good Samaritan didn't just toss a bunch of canned goods and religious tracts at the wounded person on the side of the road." ▲

Campaign 2000 renews debate over churches' political activity

The latest election campaign renewed debate over the role of churches in politics.

As in past election cycles, this year's debate involved the distribution by churches of controversial voter guides. Criticism also followed appearances by President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore at two congregations.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State has asked the Internal Revenue Service to investigate possible violations of the federal tax law's ban on church politicking in connection with appearances by Gore at the Greater Grace Temple of the Apostolic Faith in Detroit and by Clinton at the Alfred Street Baptist Church in Alexandria, Va.

In a statement, the Rev. Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United, said "federal tax law clearly prohibits church intervention in a political campaign, but that appears to be exactly what these churches did." He said, "houses of worship have no business trying to help rally support for specific candidates."

In the days after the Christian Coalition began distribution of 70 million controversial voter guides, two church-state watchdog groups announced counter-offensive efforts.

The Interfaith Alliance mailed a letter addressed to clergy in seven battleground states and nine other states urging them not to distribute the voter guides. Americans United mailed 285,000

letters to clergy across the country, advising that the voter guides could jeopardize churches' tax-exempt status.

The Christian Coalition will distribute the voter guides, including some 165 different editions on presidential and various state, senatorial and congressional

candidate's positions on a variety of issues.

In October, Jerry Falwell issued a letter defending the Christian Coalition guides in an attempt to minimize fears that distributing them at

"Churches and religious organizations may not support or oppose candidates for elected office without putting their tax-exempt status in jeopardy."

— Brent Walker



churches might violate tax laws.

In a letter to pastors, Falwell said the voter guides encourage "people to take into consideration the views of Al Gore and George W. Bush on education, abortion, school vouchers and other issues, prior to voting in November. In no way do the [Christian Coalition] voter guides urge people to vote in any particular way."

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said churches must be careful not to cross the line separating active political participation from voter education and registration efforts.

"Churches and religious organizations may not support or oppose candidates for elected office without putting their tax-exempt status in jeopardy," he said.

"Even if that were not the case, it's still a dicey venture because explicit support of a political candidate by a church will almost always cause dissension within the congregation and water down the prophetic witness," Walker added. ▲

Appeals court upholds student-initiated prayer

A federal appellate court says a recent Supreme Court ruling on school prayer does not prevent Alabama students from praying in student-initiated settings.

"So long as the prayer is genuinely student-initiated, and not the product of any school policy which actively or surreptitiously encourages it, the speech is private and it is protected," the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled Oct. 19.

The appellate court had been ordered by the U.S. Supreme Court to reconsider its ruling in a DeKalb County, Ala., case after the high court ruled that a Santa Fe, Texas, school policy allowing student prayers before football games was unconstitutional.

The appellate court ruled that permitting student prayers in the Alabama case does not conflict with the Santa Fe decision, upholding its previous ruling.

"The Establishment Clause does not require the elimination of private speech endorsing religion in public places," the 11th Circuit ruled. "The Free Exercise Clause does not permit the state to confine religious speech to whispers or banish it to broom closets. If it did, the exercise of one's religion would not be free at all." Δ

Panel asks Clinton to discuss religious liberty with Putin

The U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom wrote to President Clinton Oct. 26 urging that he raise religious freedom issues with Russia's President Vladimir Putin at their upcoming meeting.

Clinton is scheduled to meet with Putin in mid-November at the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation summit in Brunei. The commission, which formed last year under a new U.S. law, is concerned about a Dec. 31 deadline for religious groups in Russia to register or be "liquidated."

To date nearly half the groups have been unable to register. The commission's letter, written by chairman Elliott Abrams, asks Clinton to urge Putin to intervene to speed up the registration process and postpone the deadline.

"Given the progress made in the last eight years in many aspects of U.S.-Russian relations, it would be deeply unfortunate if January brought news of a systematic deterioration in religious freedom in Russia," the letter says.

Abrams said the 1997 Russian law "restricts the rights, powers, and privileges of smaller, or newer, or foreign religious communities, while giving special status to Russia's 'traditional' religions, including Russian Orthodoxy, Judaism, Islam and Buddhism." Δ

Religious liberty deteriorating new worldwide survey finds

About 75 percent of the world's population is subjected to restrictions and violations of religious freedom, according to a survey by the Freedom House's Center for Religious Freedom.

Some 36 percent of people live in countries in which religious liberties are "fundamentally violated," while 39 percent practice their faith under constraints, declared the global survey.

Religious freedom is rapidly deteriorating in many parts of the world, the report concluded, noting that "recent violence in the Middle East has increasing religious overtones." The report cited Burma, Turkmenistan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, North Korea and Tibet as countries with the broadest and most systematic violations of religious liberties.

"The world's largest countries are worsening," the report said. "After Falun Gong, China has increased its already severe persecution of Buddhists, Christians and

Muslims who refuse to submit to state control.

"In India there is rapidly escalating violence and propaganda against Christians and other minorities, often with the acquiescence of the government."

Twenty-five percent of the world's population lives under conditions of broad religious freedom, the report said, singling out Estonia, Finland, Norway, the Netherlands and the United States as countries with the best track records. Δ

Honduras law would require daily school Bible reading

The fate of a law that would require schools in Honduras to start the school day with a 10-minute reading from the Bible is now in the hands of the nation's president.

If President Carlos Flores follows the lead of the Central American nation's Congress, obligatory Bible reading would begin next year.

Church leaders in the nation are divided on the issue. Supporters say the mandatory readings will help combat social ills, while critics contend the law would violate the nation's constitutional separation of church and state.

According to Ecumenical News International, a Geneva-based religious news agency, evangelicals have threatened to withdraw support from Flores' political colleagues if he does not sign the bill. The archbishop of Tegucigalpa has met with Flores and reportedly urged him to return the bill to Congress for further debate.

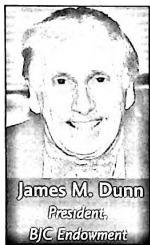
Several church leaders opposed to the measure have requested a meeting with Flores. One of those who has done so labeled the proposed law "classical political manipulation."

"In elections politicians need the votes that evangelicals offer," said Osmundo Ponce, rector of the Honduran Theological Community, a Protestant seminary in the capital city of Tegucigalpa. "They've seen the rising importance of evangelical votes elsewhere in Latin America, so they're making an unabashed play for their support."

The result, he said, would be that "in a few years no one is going to believe in the word of God."

"The big risk here is that after several years of obligatory Bible reading, the social and economic problems of this country are only going to be worse," Ponce said. "So what happens then? They'll blame the Bible." Δ

Texas Baptists take a solid stand for historic Baptist distinctives



James M. Dunn
President,
BJC Endowment

"The Baptist Convention of Texas is not a farm club of the Southern Baptist Convention," Dr. McBride of First Baptist Church, San Angelo, said almost a decade ago. On Oct. 30, more than 74 percent of those at the annual state convention proved true his

prophecy.

It's easy to dismiss this action as an internal church fight. Wrong!

The decision by Texas Baptists to chart their own course has meaning for most believers, not only Baptists. It has *political* implications. It springs from *theological* depth. It will have *social* consequences. It sounds an *ethical* note.

How so?

Political implications:

- Texas Baptists rejected the religious right posture of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission. That agency, identified with school vouchers, football prayers and right-wing candidates, does not speak for Texas Baptists.

- Public servants need to know that Baptists in Texas will face political issues, fight injustice, form coalitions for social change, but will not abandon historic Baptist church-state separation principles.

Theological depth:

- Texas Baptists affirmed their loyalty to Jesus Christ as the ultimate test for biblical interpretation and doctrinal clarity. This view is shared by those who call themselves Christian: Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox.

- They re-upped their intense dedication to personal religious experience, the right and responsibility of every believer to read and understand the Bible for himself/herself. No creed that must be signed or hierarchy that must be obeyed can trump one's immediate access to God and individual accountability. Everyone hankers for that sort of vital and voluntary religion. Everyone from new age seekers to square-baled, thick-skinned, narrow-minded, hard-shelled Baptists hungers for

intimate personal faith. There is, indeed, a God-shaped empty space in every life.

Social consequences:

- Texas Baptists committed significant funding (big bucks) to theological educators that they know and trust. Lay persons demonstrated that they know the difference between indoctrination and education, between close-minded, propositional, safety-first, creed-signing professors and those who refuse to be bound. W.T. Connor said "every generation must rewrite its theology." We've just got to speak the language to share the message.

- They took note of the demography of the state and the opportunity for outreach. As the state rapidly becomes multilingual, the Hispanic Baptist Theological School is being enabled to equip leaders for the new pluralism. Now, if only every Texas Baptist will learn Spanish!

Ethical note:

- Texas Baptists, it is fervently hoped, reminded Southern Baptist *spokesmen* that you cannot fool all of the people all of the time. The sub-Christian behavior of the fundamentalists backfired. High-handed hubris fell flat (1 Corinthians 10:12). Taxation without representation won't work in a democratic polity.

- But more seriously the basic ethic of responsible freedom was lifted up. The one distinctive gift of Baptists to the larger family of faith in the biblical tradition (Christians, Jews, Muslims) is the emphasis on soul freedom, the competence of the individual before God. We believe and identify with all others who join this accountable band that persons can, must, do and will decide for themselves about their relationship with God.

When anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's religious liberty is endangered. We hold that religious freedom, not mere toleration, is a universal human right, that self-determination about affiliation, beliefs and policies are a logical consequence of that right and responsibility.

So Baptists resist a binding creed, a propositional religiosity, a book-bound bibliolatry, any external control of a local church, any use of the state by the church or any use of the church by the state.

At least, *real* Baptists do. Texas Baptists took a big step toward staying Baptists. Δ

Court upholds constitutionality of 'silence' law

A federal court has affirmed the constitutionality of a Virginia law requiring public school students to observe a minute of silence in class each day.

In a 15-page opinion, U.S. District Judge Claude M. Hilton rejected the American Civil Liberties Union's contention the law violated the constitutional separation of church and state because it allowed for prayer during the moment of silence.

But Virginia insisted the four-month-old law had a secular purpose and did not favor religion.

"The court finds that the Commonwealth's daily observance of one minute of silence act is constitutional, the act was enacted for a secular purpose, does not advance or inhibit religion, nor is there excessive entanglement with religion," wrote Hilton, *The Washington Post* reported.

"The momentary silence neither advances nor inhibits religion," he wrote. "Students may think as they wish — and this thinking can be purely religious in nature or purely secular in nature. All that is required is that they sit silently."

The ACLU plans to appeal the ruling. Δ

Baptist Joint Committee

Supporting Bodies

- ◆ Alliance of Baptists
- ◆ American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.
- ◆ Baptist General Association of Virginia
- ◆ Baptist General Conference
- ◆ Baptist General Convention of Texas
- ◆ Baptist State Convention of North Carolina
- ◆ 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

REPORT FROM THE CAPITAL

J. Brent Walker
Executive Director
Larry Chesser
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.



**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
Website: www.bjcpa.org

Guest Views

October 2000

To My Fellow Baptist

Like millions of other Baptists, I have been deeply distressed by the unpleasant and counterproductive divisions within our denomination. In November 1999 and March 1998, I invited two dozen Baptist leaders to The Carter Center, in an attempt to overcome differences that were impeding our common mission "to bring about a spiritual awakening in our nation and around the world."

The group who attended included six presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention and leaders of the Women's Missionary Union, American Baptists, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the Texas and Virginia Baptist Conventions, and other prominent organizations. We finally agreed on a common statement, pledging ourselves to a concerted prayer effort, mutual respect for each other, a spirit of racial reconciliation, unfettered religious liberty, and "to seek other ways to cooperate to achieve common goals, without breaching our Baptist polity or theological integrity, in order that people may come to know Christ as Savior, and so that God may be glorified in ever increasing measure."

I had never been involved in a political struggle for control of the SBC, and have no desire to do so. My hope was that, as a traditional Baptist layman, I could find some channel through which I could help fulfill our Christian commitments. But since that brief interlude of apparent harmony, I have been disappointed and feel excluded by the adoption of policies and an increasingly rigid SBC creed, including some provisions that violate the basic premises of my Christian faith. I have finally decided that, after 65 years, I can no longer be associated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

What am I to do? I'll certainly continue in my role as a deacon and Sunday School teacher at Maranatha Baptist Church and support sending half our mission contribution to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. In addition to our fellow church members, Rosalynn and I have been trying to identify other traditional Baptists who share such beliefs as separation of church and state, servanthood of pastors, priesthood of believers, a free religious press, and equality of women. We agree with the adherence of most Texas Baptists, Virginia Baptists, and members of CBF to these principles as expressed in the 1963 Baptist Faith and Message.

As Georgia Baptists, we are quite concerned by the effort of SBC leaders to impose their newly adopted creed on our state convention. Our prayer is that we can avoid this divisive action, and adhere to the traditional beliefs that, for generations, have sustained our ancestors and us in a spirit of unity and cooperation.

Not having any religious or theological training, I am not qualified to explain how profound and revolutionary are the changes in the Baptist Faith and Message that are being proposed to unsuspecting Baptists. The best explanation I have heard is by Dr. Charles Wade, Executive Director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, who attended our meetings at The Carter Center almost three years ago. I hope you will listen carefully to this tape of his remarks concerning the creedal decisions of the 2000 SBC assembly, and share it with others who might help to preserve the Baptist heritage that is so precious to us.

Sincerely,
Jimmy Carter

To obtain a audio tape of Dr. Wade's remarks, contact Texas Baptist Committee, P.O. Box 3330, San Angelo, Texas 76902-3330 or by e-mail at txbc@wcc.net

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

AUTO***MIXED AADC 207
Bill Sumners
Southern Baptist Hist. Library & Archi
901 Commerce Str., Ste. #400
Nashville TN 37203-3628

