

Congress returns to face church-state issues_90803

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WASHINGTON (ABP)-As Congress returns to session this month from its summer recess, a host of church-state issues await on the agenda-from gay marriage to school vouchers.

The most visible debate may be over gay marriage. A proposed constitutional amendment that would limit marriage and marriage-like benefits to opposite-sex couples-in some cases overturning state and local laws-appears to be picking up momentum in Congress. The Federal Marriage Amendment, sponsored by Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., likely will receive committee hearings in the early fall.

But other church-state issues are farther along in the legislative process and could get action sooner. Among them:

Religious discrimination in hiring. The issue of religious discrimination in federal programs likely will resurface in Head Start legislation. When the House passed a bill July 24 that reauthorizes funding for the Head Start early-childhood-education program, it included a provision explicitly

allowing religious organizations receiving Head Start funds to discriminate in their hiring practices on the basis of religious ideology. This would repeal anti-discrimination provisions under which Head Start has operated for years.

In May, the House added similar provisions to the Workforce Reinvestment and Adult Education Act of 2003. Critics of government funding for social-service programs at churches and other religious organizations claim this is part of a wider plan by the Bush administration to enact Bush's "faith-based initiative" in a piecemeal fashion.

Both bills will come up in the Senate, where the hiring-discrimination provisions are expected to face stiffer opposition in that chamber than they did in the House.

- ◆ School vouchers. On Sept. 4, the House was expected to take up a District of Columbia appropriations bill with an expected Republican amendment to start a school-voucher program for D.C. public-school children. The scholarships for low-income children could be spent at private schools, including religious schools. Church-state separationists and many public-school advocates strongly oppose vouchers. Last year, the Supreme Court declared an Ohio voucher program constitutionally valid.

Previous attempts to create D.C. voucher programs have failed, but the latest program got a boost earlier this year with unexpected endorsements from Washington Mayor Anthony Williams and the chair of the city's school board.

- ◆ Churches and political endorsements. Legislators who think churches should be allowed to endorse or oppose political candidates without losing their tax-exempt status are expected to make a second attempt to amend Internal Revenue Service codes. The latest version of Rep. Walter Jones', R-N.C., "Houses of Worship Free Speech Restoration Act," currently in a

House committee, has managed to gain 159 co-sponsors at last count.

Although the House soundly defeated a similar bill last year, it has strong support from many Religious Right leaders and organizations. They claim churches, pastors and religious organizations are unfairly silenced on political issues by IRS regulations. Opponents claim the bill threatens religious liberty and gives religious groups political privileges other tax-exempt organizations would not enjoy.

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