

Bush promises nominees from his 'judicial philosophy'_61305

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Bush promises nominees from his 'judicial philosophy'

By Michael Foust

Baptist Press

WASHINGTON (BP)—Speaking after a Senate deal averted a showdown over judicial filibusters, President Bush said he intends to nominate to the Supreme Court only candidates who fit his judicial philosophy.

Supreme Court will hear abortion case_61305

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Supreme Court will hear abortion case

By Robert Marus

ABP Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON (ABP)—The U.S. Supreme Court has agreed to hear its first major abortion case since 2000.

The case concerns two major issues. The first is whether laws requiring underage girls to inform their parents before getting an abortion must contain an exception to preserve the mother's health. The second is how strict a legal standard those who challenge abortion laws must meet to win their cases.

An abortion-rights group challenged the constitutionality of a 2003 New Hampshire law requiring minors to notify their parents or guardians before having an abortion. The law did not contain an exception for the health of the minor.

The 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals struck the statute down, citing previous Supreme Court decisions requiring health exceptions for other restrictions on abortion rights.

But New Hampshire's attorney general appealed the circuit court's ruling, arguing that those challenging abortion restrictions must prove there is no set of circumstances under which such a restriction would be unconstitutional.

In previous decisions, the Supreme Court has followed a much lower standard for overturning restrictions on abortion rights. It has ruled in several cases that laws imposing a substantial burden on any woman's right to terminate her pregnancy were unconstitutional. However, it has never explicitly rejected the higher standard for which New Hampshire is asking.

The justices will not hear oral arguments in the case until their 2005-2006 term begins in October.

News of religion, faith, missions, Bible study and Christian ministry among Texas Baptist churches, in the BGCT, the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) and around the world.

Cadet e-mail expands controversy at Air Force Academy_61305

June 3, 2005

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Cadet e-mail expands controversy at Air Force Academy

By Robert Marus

Associated Baptist Press

WASHINGTON (ABP)—The controversy over alleged bias in favor of evangelical Christians at the United States Air Force Academy expanded when the school's top cadet sent a graduation-eve e-mail message laced with religious references to thousands of students.

Mother-daughter team serve as 'ambassadors' to military in Germany_61305

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Mother-daughter team serve as 'ambassadors' to military in Germany

By Carolyn Nichols

Baptist Press

POMPANO, Fla. (BP)—Beverly Cooley and her daughter, Nancy Sparkman, traveled to Germany to see their grandchildren and great-grandchildren. As long as they were making the trip, they decided also to serve as Christian ambassadors to U.S. soldiers and airmen stationed there.

Cooley, whose husband, Walter, was assistant pastor of First Baptist Church in Pompano, Fla., before his death in 1996, asked the congregation to contribute toward an array of items that would make a soldier feel more at home. Her daughter's husband, Stan Sparkman, pastor of Cornerstone Baptist Church in Sebastian, Fla., also encouraged his congregation to contribute toward the mission.

The two churches amassed enough funds to purchase dozens of Christian DVDs and CDs, Play Station 2 games, Christian booklets, decks of cards and board games, copies of "Chicken Soup for the Soul" and microwave popcorn.

The mother-daughter team also took 203 letters from church members and from Nancy's first-grade students at Fellsmere Elementary, which they distributed to the soldiers.

The boxes of gifts were labeled "Love to our troops from First Baptist Church, Pompano Beach and Cornerstone Baptist Church, Sebastian."

During the April trip, Cooley and Sparkman also carried homemade brownies to patients at Landstuhl Regional Medical Center. In a visit at Fisher House, where patients' families reside, they were able to plant trays of pansies.

"This really touched my heart," Cooley said. "It thrilled me to death."

Cooley, who says "missions is my life since Walter has been gone," recently spent six months as a missions volunteer teaching English as a Second Language at Hodeidah University in Yemen. In all, she has participated in 16 mission trips since her husband's death.

And, of course, the mother-daughter team spent time with Kori Chin, their granddaughter and daughter. Chin's husband, Michael, is an assistant chaplain in the Air Force. They were introduced for the first time to 2-year-old Mikie and reacquainted with 4-year-old Morgan, whom Cooley had seen as an infant.

Baptist lay pastor beheaded in Bangladesh_61305

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Baptist lay pastor beheaded in Bangladesh

JALALPUR, Bangladesh (ABP)—A Baptist lay pastor has been beheaded in Bangladesh, the second Christian leader to lose his life in that country in a year, a Christian news organization has reported.

Dulal Sarkar, 35, was attacked as he returned home from discussing his faith with local villagers, reported Compass Direct, which tracks incidents of Christian persecution. One source later identified the assailants as a group of 10 local Muslim extremists. After reporting the incident, Sarkur's wife, mother and five children have been forced to move from place to place in fear for their lives.

According to local Christians, three arrests have been made, but the remaining seven alleged attackers, who reportedly have ties to the Jamaat-e-Islami political party, are still at large. They fear the political influence of Jamaat-e-Islami may prevent the case from going to court, Compass Direct reported.

Meanwhile, Sarkur's widow has asked a Christian orphanage to take three of their five children because she cannot afford to support them.

The incident is the second beheading in a year, the news service said. Abdul Gani, a prominent Christian and physician, reportedly was decapitated by a gang in the district of Jamalpur as he returned home from work in September 2004. Gani was a counsel member of the Bangladesh Baptist Fellowship.

In 2003 another Christian leader was murdered by a group of eight men who attacked him in his home. Christian evangelist Hridoy Roy was stabbed repeatedly after being tied "crucifixion style" to his bed. Roy was known for showing the *Jesus* film and others about the life of Christ. Muslim neighbors reportedly had warned him to stop.

Bangladesh has suffered from religious disharmony since 1971, when the nation was split from Pakistan. The country is approximately 83 percent Muslim and 16 percent Hindu. Buddhists and Christians make up the remaining 1 percent. Islam was declared the official state religion in 1998.

The current government is a coalition of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party and three other Islamic parties. The third largest party, Jamaat-e-Islami, reportedly wants to make Bangladesh an entirely Islamic nation.

Book Review: What is your best life now?_61305

June 3, 2005

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Book Review: What is your best life now?

By Paul Duncan

As a Baptist pastor, when I heard about Joel Osteen's new book *Your Best Life Now!* and how successfully it is selling, I decided to check into it.

When I read the book, I did not find what I had expected. After completing the text and reviewing my notes, this sentence jumped out at me: "I know God has my best interests at heart, that he is working everything for my good" (page 43). To support his comment, Osteen does not give much evidence other than personal stories. For folks familiar with the Bible, that last quote probably made you think of Romans 8:28: "And we know that for the ones loving God he works all things for good, for those who are called according to his purpose." As a pastor, Osteen's appeal to Romans 8:28 excites me, but there is so much more in *Your Best Life Now!* that worries me.

What are you reading that other Texas Baptists would find helpful? Send suggestions and reviews to books@baptiststandard.com.

World Baptists not interested in U.S. Baptists' squabbles, Lotz says_61305

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World Baptists not interested in U.S. Baptists' squabbles, Lotz says

By David Winfrey & Trennis Henderson

Kentucky Western Recorder

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP)—Baptists of the world are more interested in unity and ministry than in denominational squabbles like the one dividing Baptists in the southern United States, said Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance.

"It's a lot better to hand out Bibles than to fight about the Bible," said Lotz, citing BWA's Scripture distribution efforts in Cuba and other ministry projects around the globe. "Baptists of the world don't want to get involved in all of our national conflicts. They want to concentrate on missions. They want to concentrate on Jesus Christ."

Lotz spoke at luncheon in Louisville, Ky., that celebrated the upcoming 100th anniversary of the global Baptist fellowship.

“The Baptist World Alliance exists to show the essential oneness of Baptist people in the Lord Jesus Christ,” Lotz added. “Christ is the center. Christ is who brings us together.”

That sense of global Baptist unity was challenged last year when the Southern Baptist Convention, a founding member of BWA in 1905, withdrew its funding and membership from the organization. SBC leaders claimed BWA tolerates theological liberalism within some member bodies, a charge BWA leaders adamantly deny.

During the luncheon, Lotz said world cultural clashes, AIDS and diversity are among the challenges facing Baptists and Christians in general.

“One of the great things about being a Baptists is that we have ... 211 Baptist conventions around the world,” Lotz said. But amid such diversity, unity can be a challenge, he conceded.

“We really are your network to the world, and sometimes you might not like some of the things you hear,” he added. Swedish, Russian and Indian Baptists “all have different views and must operate in different contexts,” he said.

Lotz noted many Baptists in America are not familiar with the work of Baptist World Alliance.

“There (are) so many Baptists in America that we don’t think we need one another,” said Lotz, whose organization is based in Virginia. “For many American Baptists, BWA sounds like a new airline. It doesn’t mean anything to them.”

But BWA is an advocate and source of encouragement to many Baptists suffering in countries where totalitarian governments or religious majorities repress their freedom to worship, Lotz added. “This is the reality of our minority brothers and sisters around the world.”

Among other challenges facing Baptists and Christians, Lotz noted:

— The charismatic movement. Christians must not let the fringe leaders of the charismatic movement keep them from embracing the Holy Spirit, he said. “We as Baptists are going to hurt ourselves if we become Binitarian” rather than Trinitarian.

— AIDS/HIV. The disease has killed 40 million people in Africa and left millions of children orphaned, Lotz noted. “Who’s going to take care of their children?”

— Laity involvement. Many churches have become too pastor focused, Lotz said. “We don’t want bishops or cardinals, but we’ve got a 100,000 little popes we call pastors.”

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A family friendly R-rated movie? Editing companies show it_61305

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A family friendly R-rated movie? Editing companies show it

By Michael Foust

Baptist Press

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (BP)—It's an embarrassing moment millions of parents have experienced—enjoying a movie at home with their family when a seemingly harmless film turns offensive.

Cybercolumn by Jeanie Miley: What to do about 'going to church?'_61305

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CYBER COLUMN: What to do about 'going to church?'

By Jeanie Miley

“Why do people attend church?” the interviewer asked his panel of experts.

“Church attendance” wasn’t really one of the topics I anticipated hearing on the national news, but, in these days, anything goes.

Jeanie Miley

Two governors veto gay-rights bills_61305

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Two governors veto gay-rights bills

ANNAPOLIS, Md. (ABP)—Two governors have vetoed gay-rights bills passed by their states’ legislatures.

Colorado Republican Gov. Bill Owens vetoed a bill that would have banned private employers in the state from discriminating on the basis of sexual orientation. Colorado already bans discrimination on that basis for state

employees.

Owen said he feared the bill would unleash a tide of litigation, but opponents noted no state employee has filed a sexual-orientation discrimination complaint against Colorado's government in the past five years.

Court upholds law allowing inmates religious freedom_61305

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Court upholds law allowing inmates religious freedom

By Robert Marus

ABP Washington Bureau

WASHINGTON (ABP)—A unanimous Supreme Court upheld a federal law that makes it easier for prison inmates—and others—to assert their religious freedom.

The justices validated the constitutionality of the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act. The law was passed by Congress and signed

by then-President Bill Clinton in 2000. It was designed to make it harder for government entities to curtail significantly a group's or individual's religious rights.

One section of the law requires states to accommodate religious practices by inmates in their prisons—such as providing a special diet or allowing them to wear a particular kind of religious dress—unless prison officials can show a compelling reason not to grant such requests. If the officials can provide such a justification, they must then also show they have burdened the inmate's religious exercise in the least restrictive manner possible.

Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, authoring the court's opinion, said the relevant section of the statute “does not, on its face, exceed the limits of permissible government accommodation of religious practices.”

At stake was whether Congress can pass laws creating special protections for religious practices among institutionalized persons. But the court's decision also had the potential to extend far beyond prison walls—to any laws making it easier for individuals or organizations to practice their faith.

The case, *Cutter vs. Wilkinson*, involved several current and former inmates of Ohio prisons who sued the state to gain accommodations for their various non-mainstream religious practices. They included practitioners of Satanism, the Wicca religion and a white-supremacist form of Christianity.

Although the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act passed with support from a broad spectrum of political and religious leaders, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals in 2003 used the lawsuit to overturn the section of the law that relates to prisoners.

A three-judge panel of the appeals court said the Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act's Section 3 violates the First Amendment's establishment clause, which prevents Congress from establishing a religion

or giving any religion a legal preference. By specifically accommodating religious rights, the appeals court said, the act advances religion in general and gives religious prisoners preference over non-religious prisoners.

Its primary effect “is not simply to accommodate the exercise of religion by individual prisoners but to advance religion generally by giving religious prisoners rights superior to those of nonreligious prisoners,” wrote Judge Ronald Gilman in the court’s opinion.

But other federal appeals courts have upheld the law’s constitutionality. The Supreme Court’s decision settles the question in their favor, reversing the 6th Circuit.

The court found the act’s institutionalized-persons provision “compatible with the establishment clause because it alleviates exceptional government-created burdens on private religious exercise,” Ginsburg wrote.

Attorneys for the state of Ohio argued that the law could effectively encourage inmates to “get religion” by offering them “benefits” that were not available to non-religious prisoners. But the Supreme Court dismissed that argument. Ginsburg noted Ohio already provides accommodations to Christian, Jewish and other prisoners who practice mainstream religions.

The Religious Land Use and Institutionalized Persons Act “presents no such defect,” she wrote. “It confers no privileged status on any particular religious sect, and singles out no bona fide faith for disadvantageous treatment.”

The justices also rejected Ohio’s argument that the burdens the law imposed on corrections officials would create problems in the unique prison environment.

In the court’s opinion, the act does not “elevate accommodation of religious observances over an institution’s need to maintain order and

safety,” Ginsburg wrote, noting that both the law’s legislative history and previous court precedent on similar cases suggest courts should generally defer to the judgment of prison officials when such questions arise. “Our decisions indicate that an accommodation [of religion] must be measured so that it does not override other significant [state] interests.”

Ginsburg also said the court would have to endanger many other government allowances for religious freedom if it were to uphold the 6th Circuit’s reasoning in the case. “Were the Court of Appeals’ view the correct reading of our decisions, all manner of religious accommodations would fall,” she wrote. For example, she said, “Congressional permission for members of the military to wear religious apparel while in uniform would fail, as would accommodations Ohio itself makes.”

Ohio Solicitor General Douglas Cole, who argued the state’s case before the Supreme Court in March, said the decision was a “mixed bag,” but that he was encouraged by parts of it.

“We are, of course, disappointed that the court reversed the 6th Circuit, but at the same time we are encouraged that the court recognized that there are some very serious safety concerns at issue, so courts will have to defer,” he said.

“All along, from our perspective, this has been all about prisoner safety. We believe that prison officials can and should and do accommodate all legitimate religious requests, but our concern was when the statute seemed to force them to change the balance they strike between safety and accommodation.”

A broad array of religious and civil-rights groups had backed the inmates’ case, including the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty.

“Where government acts to lift a substantial government-imposed burden on religion, it allows religion to flourish,” BJC General Counsel Holly

Hollman said. "The decision properly protects the religious rights of people who depend on the government for the permission and accommodation to practice their religion."

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Former Iranian army colonel acquitted in Islamic court_61305

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Former Iranian army colonel acquitted in Islamic court

By Barbara G. Baker

Compass Direct News Service

ISTANBUL (BP)—An Islamic court in Iran has acquitted a Christian lay pastor and former army colonel, Hamid Pourmand, on charges of apostasy

and proselytizing, declaring, “Under sharia (Islamic law), there are no charges against you.”