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Public School Prayer  
Advocates Are Heard

By W. Barry Garrett

WASHINGTON (BP)--Six advocates of prayers and religious exercises in public schools demanded here before the Senate Subcommittee on Constitutional Amendments that Congress approve a constitutional prayer amendment for the states to ratify.

Sen. Birch Bayh (D.-Ind.), chairman of the subcommittee, is holding a series of hearings on seven Senate resolutions proposing prayer in public schools. The first day of hearings was July 27. The second day was September 24.

The full extent of the hearings is not yet known. Bayh said he is "playing it by ear" in determining how long hearings will continue. None of the opponents of a prayer amendment and supporters of the Supreme Court decisions on religion in public schools have been heard.

Sen. Richard Schweiker (R.-Pa.) has vowed he will force a vote on prayer in public schools in the Senate before the year ends, regardless of hearings or recommendations by the Senate Judiciary Committee. His strategy in this regard may have been confused by the new position of the U.S. Catholic Conference when it came out recently in favor not only of school prayers but extensive religious teaching in the nation's schools.

The lead witnesses in the second day of hearings were two Orthodox Jewish rabbis who proposed the recitation of "nondenominational" prayers in public schools. They were Rabbi Abraham Shemtov, director of the Lubavitcher Center, Philadelphia, Pa., and Rabbi Jacob J. Hecht from the National Committee for the Furtherance of Jewish Education.

Although claiming to be the representatives of true Jews who follow the Torah (first five books of the Old Testament) as their supreme guide in life, the two rabbis admitted under questioning that they did not represent the majority of Jewish rabbis of the nation. Most Jewish groups have opposed religious exercises in public schools.

Shemtov and Hecht were not clear in their testimony as to the exact wording of the "nondenominational" prayers they advocated. They said this could be a matter of "negotiation" after a constitutional prayer amendment was ratified.

They did, however, offer an illustration of a nondenominational prayer. They quoted the prayer from New York State which had been approved by the Board of Regents there. It reads, "Almighty God, we acknowledge our dependence upon thee, and we beg thy blessing upon us, our parents, our teachers and our country."

The rabbis contended that unless religion is included as a regular part of the school schedule and curriculum the pupils will think it is of secondary importance. They cited England as an illustration of a nation that does not have separation of church and state but maintains religious liberty.

Other witnesses contended that much of the immorality in the nation during the past 10 years has been caused by Supreme Court decisions turning God out of the schools. "They indicated that allowing prayers to be recited in public schools would change the trend in the nation back to God and morality.

Among the witnesses to be heard were Charles E. Mattingly, deputy director of the National Legislative Commission of the American Legion, Mrs. Bennett G. Miller, the national coordinator of the Back to God movement, and Robert G. Howes, national coordinator of Citizens for Public Prayer. Two other private citizens testified.

Howes charged that those who defend the First Amendment as interpreted by the Supreme Court and who oppose constitutional prayer amendments are "generals without armies." He claimed that in spite of the fact most of the major denominational and interfaith religious organizations stand adamant against prayer amendments, the people of the country want such an amendment.

On future hearing dates, yet to be set, on proposed prayer amendments, constitutional experts, civil liberties spokesmen, representatives of the nation's public education system and major religious leaders will testify on the adequacy of the First Amendment as it now stands. They will oppose the proposed constitutional prayer amendments.

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CORRECTION

In Baptist Press story mailed 9-24-73, headlined "Home Mission Offering Tops \$1.6 Million Goal," please change the figure in the second line (of head) to read \$6.6 Million. Thanks.

--Baptist Press