



BAPTIST PRESS

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Religious Leaders Join Fray Over School Prayer

By Stan Haste

WASHINGTON (BP)--Leaders of mainstream Protestant denominations and American Judaism mounted a major counterattack in the battle over officially sponsored prayer in public schools by calling on the House of Representatives to resist bringing the issue to the floor for an up-or-down vote.

The more than 30 groups opposing an effort by U.S. Rep. Philip M. Crane, R-Ill., to force a vote on the volatile matter include the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs.

Armed with a fresh statement adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention at its recent annual meeting in St. Louis, Porter W. Routh, interim executive director of the Washington-based Baptist agency, joined spokesmen from seven other groups at a news conference urging defeat of the Crane-led move.

The fight in the House of Representatives has heated up in recent weeks after a massive letter-writing campaign was launched by supporters of the Crane measure, primarily prominent religious broadcasters.

The U.S. Senate passed a bill in April 1979, calling for the removal of the prayer in schools issue from the jurisdiction of all federal courts, including the Supreme Court. Senator Jesse Helms, R-N.C., himself a Southern Baptist, led the Senate effort.

Crane then introduced identical language in the House. Like Helms, Crane is one of the most conservative members of Congress.

In the House, the Judiciary Committee has refused to schedule hearings on the proposal. Fearing the measure might die, Crane asked members of the House to sign a "discharge petition" to circumvent the committee's inaction by bringing the bill to the floor for a yes-or-no vote.

The discharge petition device requires that a simple majority, or 218, sign to force the vote. Under severe pressure in recent weeks, many members have signed, bringing the latest confirmed total to 169, or 49 short of the required 218.

Baptists and other religious groups have consistently supported the U.S. Supreme Court's 1962 and 1963 decisions banning state-sponsored and written school prayers.

Routh, appearing at the news conference with seven other leaders from Protestant and Jewish communities, said that while Baptists have internal differences on many issues, Baptist bodies in the United States are in "complete agreement" on government-sponsored prayer in schools.

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Routh cited the 1980 SBC resolution, which expressed opposition "to attempts, either by law or other means, to circumvent the Supreme Court's decisions forbidding government authored or sponsored religious exercises in public schools." He also cited similar SBC statements adopted in 1964 and 1971.

Referring to the Helms/Crane language, Routh told reporters, "We feel very strongly that the adoption of this legislation would not be in the best interests of the First Amendment... or of religion itself."

Dean M. Kelley, National Council of Churches associate for religion and civil liberties, shared Routh's view, declaring that the Helms/Crane legislation "is of no service to religion."

Kelley also warned that the scheme to remove the matter of prayer in schools from federal court jurisdiction is a dangerous "innovation" which, if successful, would signal that "no portion of the Bill of Rights is safe." Other controversial Supreme Court decisions involving civil rights, freedom of speech, assembly, press, and other rights guaranteed in the Bill of Rights would be vulnerable to the same fate, he said.

Kelley and Routh were joined at the news conference by representatives of the United Presbyterian Church, United Methodist Church, Lutheran Council, Episcopal Church, Synagogue Council of America, and Anti-Defamation League of B'nai B'rith.

In a related development, Routh mailed a letter June 17 to all 435 members of the House opposing the Crane discharge petition drive.

Citing the recent SBC action, Routh asked congressmen who have already signed the petition to remove their names and urged those who have so far resisted to refrain from signing.

"By this action we strongly feel you will be in support of the constitutional requirement of the separation of church and state and the larger principle of religious liberty," Routh wrote the lawmakers.

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Tennessee Baptists May Aid
Missionaries in Upper Volta

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RICHMOND, Va. (BP)--Tennessee Baptists' hunger committee is recommending that they be the first Baptist state convention to cooperate with the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in a "total impact" project covering evangelism, relief and development.

If the site is approved by convention messengers this fall, the Tennessee Baptist Convention will link with the Foreign Mission Board in carrying out a project in the Sandwabo area of Upper Volta, a country in Africa's Sahel region often threatened by drought.

Starting later this fall, they plan to send 50 to 60 volunteers a year to six villages in the area around Tenkodogo, Southern Baptists' newest mission station in Upper Volta. Although the project may include building a dam to deal with the area's chronic water problems, it will also include evangelism, agricultural work, school and church construction, and training in nutrition, public health and literacy.

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The world hunger committee of Tennessee Baptists approved Upper Volta as the project site after a recent fact-finding trip by committee chairman Earl C. Davis, pastor of First Baptist Church, Memphis, Tenn., and John R. Cheyne, the Foreign Mission Board's associate consultant for relief ministries.

The Tennessee convention appointed the committee in 1978, Davis said, based on an emotional response to the hunger crisis. Charged with finding a way Tennessee Baptists could become involved in solving the hunger problem, the group decided to work with the underlying causes of hunger through the Foreign Mission Board.

The Tennessee convention has committed \$500,000 for the project and the Foreign Mission Board will be asked in June to allocate \$432,900 for initiating the project, said John E. Mills, the board's secretary for West Africa. Part of the board's appropriation, he said, will be replaced by the Tennessee convention.

In addition, Providence Baptist Church, Charlotte, N.C., has already donated \$20,000 to support a volunteer agriculturalist to be chosen by the board for the area. Henry Crouch, pastor of the church, is a member of the Foreign Mission Board.

By using volunteers, missionaries in Upper Volta expect to save \$1 million over what the project would cost if contractors were hired. They also expect to reap the extra benefits of the project's evangelistic phase.

The fact that the churches already in the area were started by earlier relief efforts shows what can be done when relief is tied with evangelism, said Mills. There are 19 preaching points in the area, but only three preachers. Population in the rural area totals just over 4,000.

Southern Baptists helped deliver 6,100 metric tons of grain in Upper Volta in 1978 after drought and famine brought the country to the attention of the world.

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Pioneer of Baptist Work
In Egypt Dies in Cairo

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CAIRO, Egypt (BP)--Seddik W. Girgis, founder of Baptist work in Egypt and the only president of the Egyptian Baptist Convention, died June 11 in Cairo. He was about 80 years old.

Girgis, known for some time as the only Baptist worker in the entire nation of Egypt, was the subject of "Echo," a documentary produced by the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission as part of the commission's 1966 "Answer" series.

Girgis first contacted the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board in 1954 to set up cooperative efforts between the two Baptist groups. From that time on, missionary representatives have been working with Girgis and the Baptist churches in Egypt, although no Southern Baptist missionaries are stationed there. The Egyptian Baptist Convention was organized in the late '60s.

Born in Sennoris, Egypt, Girgis graduated from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and Texas Christian University, both in Fort Worth, in 1931 with masters degrees. He served several Texas churches while studying in the States. At the time of his death, he was pastor of Shubra Baptist Church, Cairo.

He is survived by his wife Linda and daughter, Dr. Lydia Girgis.

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Baptists to Endure,
Cuban Pastor Claims

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (BP)--Baptists in Cuba will survive, despite the sharp depletion of their ranks during the recent "freedom flotilla" to the United States, a former Cuban Baptist leader predicts.

"In the early days of Christianity, the church grew strong because Christians spread all over the world. I believe God has a similar plan for Christians in Cuba," says Heberto Becerra, president of Baptists in western Cuba from 1974 to 1978.

"Baptist work in Cuba will be difficult, because such a large amount of church members have left, many more are planning to leave and almost all pastors want to leave," said Becerra, a pastor in the United States on a temporary visa when the Cuban exodus started April 21.

"I really don't know how the church will grow and continue," he says. "God must have a plan for all this--that's the only explanation."

Becerra came to the United States April 16 to participate in a series of evangelistic crusades. Unaware that the flotilla would begin in just five days, he made plans to seek asylum in the United States and then send for his wife and five children under the family reunification program.

"If I had known about the flotilla, I probably would have stayed in Cuba and tried to bring my family over on the boats," he laments. "Now it looks as if the Cuban government is trying to hold them up. I hope they can leave soon."

Becerra is one of at least nine Cuban Baptist pastors to leave that country since the first of the year.

"It's very difficult in a Communist country to have a position of responsibility, especially if it's related to religion," he explains. "It's difficult for our pastors, because they (Cuban government officials) understand that pastors are key persons" in terms of influence.

"The desire to leave is very strong, and usually it is easier for a pastor and his family to leave--their children are not likely to be married to Communists and their ties with the homeland are not so strong. The pastor's family stays more isolated than lay families," he says.

That's not to say, however, that lay families do not harbor strong desires to leave the country. Most of the members of Becerra's congregation have fled to the United States, he claims.

Because of the influx of Hispanics--Cuban and others--Becerra and another Cuban pastor, Andres Garcia, have met with Baptist Home Mission Board officials to volunteer their services to Spanish-speaking congregations in the United States. Both live in Florida while awaiting assignment.

"Our current plan is to continue in ministry here in the United States," Becerra said. "We come with a tremendous opportunity to work and to start over again."