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News Analysis

Equal Access Act Is Milestone
In Religion-In-Schools Debate

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (BP)--This summer's passage of an equal access measure marked the first time Congress has cleared substantive legislation dealing with the role of religion in public schools since the landmark 1962-63 Supreme Court decisions on school prayer.

By big margins of 337-77 in the House of Representatives and 88-11 in the Senate, Congress declared voluntary student religious groups have the same access to before-and-after-school meetings as other student-initiated groups in secondary schools.

The bipartisan coalition of lawmakers favoring equal access produced the first break in the heated political wars over school prayer that broke out following the high court's decisions which banned state-sponsored religious exercises in public schools. For two decades since those decisions, Congress has considered—but not passed—numerous constitutional amendments and court-stripping bills designed to overturn them. Sense of Congress resolutions on school prayer and moments of silence also have failed to move.

Supporters of the equal access concept hoped their efforts to carefully protect the Constitution's free speech and free exercise of religion guarantees, without crossing its barrier against an establishment of religion by the state, would cool the heated rhetoric and debate over school prayer.

But any notion equal access passage would rescue the school prayer issue from its 22-year role as a political football was short-lived.

The day after the House cleared equal access for President Reagan's signature as part of a math-science bill, supporters of state-sponsored prayer in schools were at it again, this time offering a "vocal prayer" amendment to an omnibus education bill pending on the House floor.

After five hours of emotional debate, the House rejected the Republican-backed vocal prayer proposal, opting instead for a "silent prayer" proposal many lawmakers saw as nothing more than a restatement of the status quo.

But published remarks by House Republican whip Trent Lott, R-Miss., made it clear the vocal prayer rider was offered to get members of the other party on record voting against it. The House-passed education bill and its silent prayer rider face an uncertain future because the Senate has produced no comparable legislation.

Another effort to politicize the issue came the night before final passage of the equal access measure in the House when President Reagan cited it in a list of six bills he charged "were bottled up in the House for months, and in some instances, even years." At the time of Reagan's news conference remarks, a vote on equal access already had been set for the next day and the votes were there to pass it.

Actually, far from being bottled up, equal access moved to final passage with remarkable speed compared to most even remotely controversial legislation.

Originally introduced late in the 97th Congress by Sen. Mark O. Hatfield, R-Ore., the equal access concept steadily picked up support in Congress and the U.S. religious community. Among its early supporters were the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs and the Christian Legal Society.

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Hatfield reintroduced his proposal early last year in the 98th Congress. A broader version applying to elementary as well as secondary school students was introduced by Sen. Jeremiah Denton, R-Ala., also in early 1983.

That fall, a bill similar to Denton's was introduced in the House by Lott and one similar to Hatfield's was offered by Rep. Don Bonker, D-Wash.

After a series of hearings earlier this year, Rep. Carl D. Perkins, D-Ky., steered the Bonker bill through his Education and Labor Committee and brought the measure to the House floor for a vote under a "suspension of the rules" procedure. That procedure requires a two-thirds vote, generally permits no amendments and allows only one hour of debate. The May 15 House vote was 11 shy of the two-thirds needed.

By the time of the first House vote, the Hatfield-Bonker proposals had drawn the support of most U.S. religious organizations, Jewish and Lutheran groups being the most notable exceptions. It was also opposed by the American Civil Liberties Union and education groups.

After the House defeat and a June 6 effort by Denton to attach a Denton-Hatfield compromise to the pending math-science bill, representatives of both sides of the debate—including the Baptist Joint Committee, Christian Legal Society and the ACLU began discussions on compromise language that could satisfy complaints lodged against the proposal during the House debate.

What emerged was a broader bill which extended equal access protections to political, philosophical and other speech in addition to religious speech, protection for minority groups and provisions limiting participation by off-campus people. As the changes were made, original supporters remained intact and many previous opponents were neutralized or became backers.

When the final draft was offered by Hatfield June 27 it easily passed the Senate. But when the math-science bill reached the House, the equal access provisions were referred to both Perkins' committee and the Judiciary Committee where Civil and Constitutional Rights Subcommittee chairman Don Edwards, D-Calif., continued to oppose it.

With Perkins threatening to bring up the proposal under a rarely-used procedure known as Calendar Wednesday, Edwards and other House leaders agreed to another vote under suspension of the rules July 25. This time, it passed handily, drawing bipartisan support that included southern and moderate Democrats and nearly all Republicans.

The final draft makes it unlawful for secondary schools which permit noncurriculum related student groups to meet before and after school to deny the same meeting opportunities to students because of the "religious, political, philosophical or other" content of their speech at such meetings.

It further provides that such meetings be voluntary, student-initiated and not sponsored by the school or other government agencies. Employees may be present only in a non-participatory capacity and the meetings cannot substantially interfere with the orderly conduct of educational activities.

Non-school persons, under the act, may not direct, conduct, control or regularly attend these student meetings.

The act also forbids school boards or other state agencies to influence the content of prayer or other religious exercises, to require any person to participate in such meetings, to compel school employees to attend meetings if the speech involved is contrary to their own beliefs, to sanction meetings otherwise unlawful, or to limit the rights of groups which are not of a specified numerical size.

These protections obviously satisfied a majority of the 98th Congress. The next question is whether the nation's courts will agree that this legislation gives secondary school students enough room to exercise their free speech right without crossing the line of government-established religion.

Louisiana Baptists, Catholics
Nurture Off-Shore Ministry

By Oscar Hoffmeyer Jr.

L.P.R.
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LAFAYETTE, La. (BP)—Baptists and Catholics of Louisiana are sharing methods of ministry to off-shore oil workers "because the men have more needs than just salaries."

Many workers are family men who would welcome strength from other Christians as they face the peer pressure for rough and tumble living on the rigs.

Louisiana Baptists, under the direction of Jimmy Brossette, of the missions division, have sponsored an off-shore ministry for more than five years. A task force of the Louisiana Catholic Conference, organizing a similar ministry, invited Brossette to share ideas and procedures during a recent meeting in Lafayette, La.

Brossette noted there are enough Baptist and Catholic men on the rigs that encouragement and support from their churches can make changes for a better working lifestyle.

"Off-shore workers and their families face pressures others do not face. A work schedule of seven days at work and seven days at home is one of these," he said.

With extended time on rigs workers find entertainment through literature and videotape television programs during their off-duty time. "The problem is much of the material is pornographic," Joseph Richard, a Catholic deacon from Baton Rouge said. He has been an off-shore worker for 25 years.

Richard, a member of the LCC task force, suggested the church have an organization for training laymen who can live their Christian beliefs regardless of the peer pressure.

Richard's reaction when faced with profanity or pornography: "I just won't listen to it. They respond in two ways. They ignore me or acknowledge I'm right and say they would like to change their ways."

Richard confirmed Brossette's statement that a ministry must include laymen who work on the rigs because insurance policies preclude churches providing ministers who would visit the men to hold services.

"We developed a program of Bible study at the suggestion of a Baptist off-shore worker," Brossette said. As the program expanded a program of training in Bible study and witnessing was developed.

Brossette noted that most rigs have cassette players. When the men return to work they take film with Bible study programs and non-pornographic entertainment.

Asked how Bible study programs were shown on the players if they were used by others, Brossette said, "Our men just asked for equal time. They would say, 'If you can use the VCR for porno film we can use it for Bible study.'"

Brossette noted, however, one company has stopped use of the VCR for any reason except for official company training or safety film. This was the result of the excessive pornographic programs being shown, he said.

Msgr. A.J. Vincent, vicar for social services of the Diocese of Lake Charles, remarked "We need to cooperate and not to compete. There is enough work for both of us."

Msgr. Robert Angelle, LCC executive director, said Catholics are attending Baptist Bible study on the rigs and when the two groups share together this will be a boost in the brotherhood of the each. "Catholics need to know they will not be alienated if they attend others' services. Neither group is proselyting," he said.

Brossette noted approximately 125 Baptist men have been involved in Bible study programs on more than 90 rigs.

"They are able to share their faith as others see them live their Christian beliefs. There is no pressure applied for others to participate. Our men have Bibles available to give to others when they are requested."

Bibles with an off-shore insignia are provided by the Louisiana Baptist Convention from state mission funds.

The LCC task force, following a survey of exit cities, noted at one place there were license plates from more than six states. Because of the diverse geographical factor both groups agreed that work through a local church was the best way to involve the men.

Members of the LCC task force on off-shore ministries will make concrete proposals to their board in October.

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HMB Honors Home
Missions Workers

By Michael Tutterow

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GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--A church which successfully navigated the stormy seas of a transitional community and a Texas missions leader who consults with churches in transition were among several home missions workers honored at the Glorieta, N.M.

Noland Road Baptist Church was named the 1984 outstanding church for the West in the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's PACT (Project: Assistance for Churches in Transitional Communities) program.

Bob Banks, HMB vice-president of administration who presented the awards for the HMB's associational missions division, told those attending Home Missions Week at Glorieta Baptist Conference Center that during the 1970s the Noland Road church relocated from its inner city location. Though in a new community, the church found itself in transition with little growth.

Shortly after Ron Hornecker came as pastor in 1977, the church underwent a PACT consultation to determine direction for future church ministries. The study resulted in a church statement of purpose and members set 10 church priorities, which included hiring a youth minister, developing family oriented programs for missions and education and beginning community ministries.

Since 1977, explained Banks, the church has developed both singles and senior adult ministries, a day-care program which includes pre-school instruction, a mid-week educational and missions program for all ages, and an intensive community outreach program to follow-up on church prospects.

Since the PACT study, Sunday school attendance has grown from an average of 115 people to 200; the church has also recorded more than 349 additions, with a 1984 budget twice that of the pre-PACT budget, Banks said.

"The PACT study served as the basis for virtually everything we have done in the past seven years," Hornecker said. "The process involved the whole congregation. They became aware of the church's history, the make-up of the community and of some ministry ideas of other church members."

The study, added Hornecker, planted seeds among church members which have developed into church programs. "The people owned the process and the product," he stressed.

In presenting the award for PACT consultant for the West to Charles Lee Williamson of Dallas, Banks said, "The PACT program in Texas has moved from non-existent to one of the finest in the Southern Baptist Convention" during the past four years, due entirely to the efforts of Williamson and his staff.

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PACT consultants, explained Williamson, study the history of churches in transition and demographic changes in a church's surrounding community to identify critical issues facing the church. Consultants also conduct interviews with church members to determine goals and aspirations for the church as well as untold feelings of resentment or frustration. Based on the data, the consultant draws up goals and action plans with church members for congregations to take on new direction and meaning, he explained.

Williamson, who had done consulting with churches for 15 years and has worked as a PACT consultant for more than six years, has personally been involved in five major PACT blitzes in Texas and has done consultations for churches throughout the state. He has been successful "in both helping transitional churches come to grips with their situations and in salvaging depressed and struggling pastors," said Banks.

Approximately 56 percent of Southern Baptist churches in metropolitan areas are located in significantly changing communities, noted Banks. The HMB has provided training for 110 PACT consultants throughout the nation to work with the nearly 3,000 congregations experiencing racial, economic, age or other forms of transition, he added.

Also honored during the conference were two persons named the 1984 directors of missions for the West--Hugh Durham, director of missions for the Tyron-Evergreen Baptist Association in Texas, (metropolitan missions), and John Gilbert, director of missions for Two Rivers, William Wallace and Washington associations in Louisiana (rural-urban missions).

Jere Allen, HMB metropolitan missions department director, described Durham as "a pioneer, leader and thinker" who has led his association from 55 to 80 churches, with six new congregations in the making, during the past decade.

Allen also noted Sunday school enrollment in the association had increased 55 percent in the past five years under Durham's leadership.

Durham worked with Texas Baptists to produce materials on starting new churches and he co-authored a book for associational directors of missions on church starting, Allen said. He also said Durham has been active in civic organizations and was president of an ecumenical group in his community, emphasizing his total involvement in the work and ministry of his association.

Durham, 55, has been a pastor of churches in Texas and is a graduate of Baylor University and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth, Texas.

Quentin Lockwood, director of the HMB's rural-urban missions department, presented John Gilbert's.

Gilbert, who will retire this year, has a rich heritage in missions, said Lockwood, who noted Gilbert's father was and his son now is a director of missions. Gilbert was lauded for his work in establishing innovative ministries while a director of missions. During his five-year tenure as director of missions for New Orleans Baptist Association, Gilbert established a seamen's ministry; he also has been instrumental in beginning a chaplaincy program for the Louisiana state police, said Lockwood.

Gilbert recently participated in a mission trip from his home church and led vacation Bible schools for a south Louisiana shrimping community. The group helped a church with only 35 members in Sunday school enroll more than 300 children and adults in the week-long Bible school. Attendance averaged 260 people a day, said Lockwood, and the church now has a solid base upon which to build. Gilbert's willingness to "get his hands dirty" in the work of missions exemplifies the reason he was selected to receive this year's award, added Lockwood.

Gilbert, a graduate of Mississippi College and New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary, has been a pastor of churches in Mississippi and has been a Louisiana director of missions for a total of 23 years, serving in New Orleans, Shreveport and southeast Louisiana. He has been director of missions in southeast Louisiana since 1974.