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Attorney reminds churches
to avoid partisan activity

By Kathy Palen

N-BJC

WASHINGTON (BP)--With the 1988 elections just a few months off, a Baptist church-state attorney has reminded churches to avoid partisan political activity that could jeopardize their tax-exempt status.

In a recent article, Oliver S. Thomas, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, said the Internal Revenue Code prohibits all tax-exempt organizations, including churches, from participating in any political campaign on behalf of or in opposition to any candidate for elective public office.

Thomas said if a church wishes to avoid jeopardizing its tax-exempt status, it should follow several basic principles:

-- Do not endorse a candidate for elective public office directly or indirectly, whether through a sermon, church newsletter or sample ballot.

"Statements supporting or opposing a candidate must be avoided," Thomas explained. "In addition, churches should avoid using pejorative or inflammatory labels when mentioning a candidate by name."

If a church official endorses a candidate without the congregation's authorization, he added, the church should issue a disclaimer in the same forum, indicating the official's statement does not reflect the church's views.

-- Do not provide financial or other support to a campaign for elective office.

A tax-exempt organization may not provide financial support for any candidate, political party or political action committee, Thomas said. It also may not provide volunteers, mailing lists, publicity or free use of facilities unless those facilities are made available on an equal basis to all other parties and candidates in the community, he said.

-- Do not distribute or display campaign literature on church premises.

Churches should not give permission to individual members to distribute campaign literature before or after services, except in the setting of a public forum or debate where all candidates are given an opportunity to state their views and distribute their literature, Thomas wrote.

-- Do not organize, establish or support a political action committee.

While individual members of a congregation may establish a PAC for the support of a particular party or candidate, he said, the church may not support the PAC or provide a platform for its particular political views.

"The list of prohibited activities almost can be summarized in a single sentence: You may talk about issues but not about individual parties or candidates," Thomas wrote.

On the other hand, he said, churches may conduct a number of legitimate voter education activities without jeopardizing their tax-exempt status. Those activities include:

-- Distributing voting records of legislators or members of Congress that indicate no bias for or against a particular member. Statements that the legislator agrees or disagrees with the church's position on particular issues likely would be considered biased, he said.

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"Unfortunately, the IRS has indicated that bias may exist where the organization targets a narrow range of issues and distributes the publication broadly beyond its own membership," he added. "If, for example, the only issue listed is abortion and the publication is widely distributed during the campaign, it is likely to be considered biased.

"A church may target a narrow range of issues as long as it does not identify candidates for re-election, makes no comment on an individual's overall qualifications for office, does not time the distribution to coincide with an election, does not target distribution to areas where elections are occurring, does not disseminate the information beyond its organizational membership and points out the inherent limitations of judging a candidate on the basis of his or her views on a limited number of issues."

-- Polling all candidates through an unbiased questionnaire that covers a wide range of issues.

Generally, Thomas wrote, a candidate questionnaire will not be considered biased if the questions are worded fairly, a wide range of issues is covered and the results are reported in a fair and objective manner.

-- Sponsoring public forums, debates and lectures during which all candidates are allowed to state their views and/or field questions.

"If a church wishes to hear from the various candidates but is unwilling to sponsor a separate forum or debate," he said, "it may invite candidates to address the church during a regular or called meeting so long as each candidate is given an equal opportunity to speak and no biased statements for or against a particular candidate are made before or after his or her remarks. It is advisable for the organization, in introducing a candidate, to state clearly and emphatically that the views of the candidate are not necessarily the views of the church and that no endorsement is intended by the candidate's presence."

Thomas went on to say that while tax-exempt organizations may not support or oppose candidates for elective office, individual members have a constitutionally protected right to participate in the political process. A difficulty can arise when the individual member is a minister or other church official, he added.

"While the minister is free to participate in the political process, he or she must be careful to avoid the appearance of speaking or acting on behalf of the church," Thomas said. "When campaigning for or against a candidate, the minister should avoid being introduced in his official capacity. If mention is made of his church, it should be accompanied by a disclaimer that makes clear that the affiliation is listed for identification purposes only and that the minister is not acting on behalf of the church.

"Separating the minister's role as an individual voter from his role as a church leader is always difficult, particularly in the context of religious services or rallies. For that reason, a minister should never endorse a candidate from the pulpit, even though he might insist that he is speaking in his individual capacity."

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Managing change is greatest
HMB challenge, Banks says

N-HMB

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GLORIETA, N.M. (BP)--How to manage change effectively is the greatest challenge currently facing the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, the agency's executive vice president said at Glorieta (N.M.) Baptist Conference Center.

"We live in a world of constant change," said Robert T. Banks during a Home Missions Week conference at Glorieta. "Change is a certainty, and we have to move with those changes. We cannot be static; we must be dynamic."

Banks listed 18 trends he sees evolving in the national operations of the Atlanta-based agency.

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He pointed out that the Home Mission Board, which supports the work of 3,760 missionaries and missions personnel in the United States, Canada and assigned territories, no longer is a direct missionary sending agency.

Although it continues to send out missionaries, the board increasingly is a catalyst working with Baptist state conventions, associations and churches in cooperative efforts, Banks said.

In the future, Banks predicted, the board will put more priority in its budgeting and personnel on starting new churches. This emphasis reflects the concern of the board's president, Larry L. Lewis, who pledged to place 1,000 church planters on the mission field within the next decade.

Banks estimated about 500 of the current 3,760 missionaries have a primary role in starting new churches.

He predicted a continued emphasis on ministry to the needs of people, with the focus shifting to church action rather than on more funds and personnel for board-sponsored ministry centers. The board currently helps support about 60 mission centers, about half of them connected to a local church or church-type mission.

Citing what he described as a "crisis in evangelism," Banks expressed increasing concern for the complexity of evangelism in the Southern Baptist Convention. He cited deep concern for a trend toward decreasing numbers of Christian conversions and baptisms in local Baptist churches.

He also predicted greater priority on reaching the 44 "mega cities" of America with populations of 1 million or more. He pointed out the two largest cities, New York and Los Angeles, have populations that exceed eight old-line Southern states. But only 500 Southern Baptist churches are in New York and Los Angeles, compared to 17,000 churches in the eight states.

Another major trend is increasing diversity of the ethnic membership of Southern Baptist churches. "Our greatest success," Banks said, "has been with ethnic and language groups." Southern Baptists have now become the most ethnically diverse denomination in America, with worship services each week in 85 languages among 88 ethnic groups. Although diversity is not bad, he said, one of the big questions Southern Baptists face is whether the convention will be able to deal positively with diversity.

Because of such trends, Banks predicted greater networking and cooperation with both the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board and more emphasis on partnership relationships with Baptist missionaries to the United States from other countries. Both Brazilian and Korean Baptists have sent their own missionaries to the United States, he said.

Another trend is the effect of the world economy on the nation and on home missions. "We no longer have a national economy with which we work, for we are affected by the world economy," Banks said.

Trends in the convention have also affected the Home Mission Board, Banks said.

He cited a trend toward more restrictive personnel policies adopted by the board of directors. Recent policies adopted by the board have related to divorce, doctrine, "speaking in tongues" and women pastors. The policies are more restrictive, compared to previous policies, he noted.

A related trend is greater involvement of board members in both positive and negative ways, Banks said: "Board members want greater hands-on involvement than ever before, and that is good. But it becomes negative when they go beyond setting policy beyond setting direction, and beyond their own prescribed responsibilities and begin to try to do the work of the staff. When they try to become administrators and to deal with day-to-day operations, that's when it becomes negative."

Another trend is toward increasing legal concerns in the board's operations and increasing possibilities of legal action against the board. "We are living in a time when people are not hesitant to file a lawsuit against a church or state convention, and we are faced with the legal issue of ascending liability," he said.

As part of all these trends, the staff and the board are being called to greater accountability for the expenditure of funds, personnel and productivity, Banks said. "That's not bad; that's good, for we should be accountable for these resources," he said.

Banks predicted increasing concern in the future for the board's priorities, objectives, strategies and staff structure; for the replacement of 24 key staff persons, including three vice presidents who will retire in the next five years; increasing communication efforts with Southern Baptists; and more internal coordination and cooperation toward a united agency thrust.

Many people are threatened by change, Banks said, stressing, "But we need to see change not as a threat, but as a challenge and an opportunity to do a better job in the future."

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Largest-ever medical team
shares gospel in Venezuela

By Art Toalston

F-FMB

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MARACAIBO, Venezuela (BP)--It wasn't "pill power" that helped 175 Southern Baptist medical volunteers reach some 800 Venezuelans for Christ, the project's organizer pointed out.

"We went with God's power," said Dewey Dunn, a Nashville physician, after returning from the 10-day trip Aug. 1.

It was the largest volunteer medical project ever undertaken by Southern Baptists, said Van Williams, associate director in the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board's human needs department. And it was part of the Tennessee Baptist Convention's three-year partnership with the National Baptist Convention of Venezuela.

Most of the 175 doctors, dentists, nurses and other assistants were from Tennessee, but 13 other states also were represented.

Nine teams worked in Venezuela's second-largest urban area, Maracaibo, home to 900,000 people. Four teams worked in the Valencia area, with 600,000 people.

The 13 teams saw 10,000 patients during six days. All their clinics except one were held in Baptist churches. After an interview on a Catholic TV station in Maracaibo, the volunteers accepted an invitation to conduct a half-day clinic in the station's studio.

Some clinics were held in communities with no running water, Dunn said.

A Saturday morning worship service in the Miami airport before their departure for Venezuela kindled a sense of spiritual unity among the volunteers, the physician said. Many of the volunteers began their fellowship around midnight the night before, he added. A storm kept their flight from Atlanta to Miami on the runway for an hour and a half.

"Our posture all along has been to go to Venezuela 'on our knees,' not in some proud, haughty North American posture," Dunn said. "We went as friends, brothers and colleagues to share with the Venezuelans."

The volunteers worked with more than 20 Venezuelan doctors and dentists during the week, two of whom made professions of faith in Christ, Dunn noted. Beyond the clinics, about 20 volunteers representing various medical specialties gave lectures in medical school classes and during hospital rounds in both Maracaibo and Valencia.

The trip was a "small taste of heaven," said dental hygienist Pat Zimmer of Nashville. "We arrived as strangers and, nine days later, we felt we were leaving our family. This was my first mission trip, but I pray it will not be my last."

Kathy Sherrod, a psychologist from Nashville, recounted, "While listening to people take turns praying in English, Spanish and the Goajira Indian language, I was struck by God's ability to understand all people."

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Medical technologist Margaret Blank of Knoxville, Tenn., said, "After I did a woman's lab work, she said, 'May God repay you for what you have done, as I have no money.' I hugged her and thanked her -- how could I tell her that he already has repaid us?"

Nashville medical student Edith Lovegren told about an 85-year-old patient: "After 10 minutes, I could not determine why she had come. We spoke about past illnesses and family, and finally it occurred to me that the reason she had come was because she was lonely.

"When it was time for her to leave, I shook her hand and said, 'I really enjoyed talking to you.' She looked very surprised, gave me a big smile, a big hug and kissed my cheek so loudly that my ears rang for several seconds.

"At that moment, I realized that our primary purpose in Venezuela was not to dispense medicines, pull teeth or fit eyeglasses. Our primary purpose was to give out the love of God."

Nearly three dozen married couples were among the volunteers. But for Dunn, the project was even more of a family affair. He was accompanied by his wife, Bobbie, a home economics teacher; their son, James, also a physician; two daughters, Cathy and Debbie, both nurses; and Debbie's husband, David Gregory, a pharmacist.

An evangelistic campaign in the two cities, involving 240 more volunteers through the Tennessee-Venezuela partnership, is scheduled to begin the third week in August.