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REPORT from the Capital

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Executive Director

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◆ Development Update ◆

Rep. Chet Edwards to speak at RLC luncheon

You won't want to miss this year's Religious Liberty Council luncheon on Friday, July 3, held in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly in Houston, Texas. The RLC is pleased to announce Rep. Chet Edwards of Texas is the featured speaker. Rep. Edwards is a strong supporter of religious liberty and a good friend of the BJC.



Edwards

The BJC will also honor a great Texan by presenting posthumously its most prestigious award, the J.M. Dawson Religious Liberty Award, to Phil Strickland. Previous recipients of the award, named after the BJC's first executive director, include Patsy Ayres, the Baugh family, Buddy Shurden, Tony Campolo and former President Jimmy Carter.

Tickets for this event are now available for \$35 or you may host a table of 10 for \$350.00. Visit www.BJConline.org to order your tickets online. To purchase

tickets by phone or for more information, call Kristin Clifton at 202-544-4226 or e-mail her at kclifton@BJConline.org. Tickets purchased by June 19th will be mailed to you in time for the event.

Religious Liberty Council Luncheon
11:30 a.m. – 1:15 p.m.
Friday, July 3
George R. Brown Convention Center,
Ballroom C
Houston, Texas



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REPORT from the Capital

Texas textbook decisions have national implications

AUSTIN, Texas — More than two centuries after his birth and nearly 150 years after his groundbreaking *On the Origin of Species* was published, Charles Darwin is still a controversial character in Texas. And the latest battle over his legacy there could have implications for the nation's public schools.

In votes March 26 and 27, the Texas Board of Education narrowly defeated controversial language for state science standards that would have called for public school teachers to offer instruction on the “strengths and weaknesses” of evolutionary theory. But they also adopted language in several compromise amendments that, according to some science and civil liberties groups, could offer a foothold for creationist theories about the origins of life to climb into the state's classrooms and textbooks.

“I think the big picture was they essentially adopted amendments ... that will allow creationists on the board to pressure publishers into putting phony challenges to evolution in their textbooks that are based on almost straight-up creationist arguments,” said Dan Quinn, communications director for the Texas Freedom Network, March 31.

Both literal “young-Earth” creationism and its close relative, intelligent design theory, have lost repeated battles in federal courts in recent years, with judges ruling that they are too tied to religious teachings and too removed from scientific consensus to pass constitutional muster. In response, many proponents of religious explanations for the origins of life have shifted tactics to a “teach the controversy” approach to teaching about evolution and other controversial scientific theories in schools.

Creationism asserts God created the Earth in ways literally consistent with the two creation stories found in the first two chapters of Genesis. Intelligent design theory, meanwhile, does not necessitate belief in literal six-day creationism, but posits that life is too complex to have evolved merely by mutation and natural

selection without the aid of some unseen intelligent force guiding the process.

Proponents of creationism and intelligent design in several states have attempted to force science teachers to offer evidence for and against major parts of evolutionary theory, despite the fact that the vast majority of the mainstream scientific community supports it. In fact, most scientific professional societies contend, evolution is not a “theory” as the term is used in non-scientific parlance. Rather, they note, Darwin's observations

have repeatedly been proven accurate, and evolutionary concepts underpin much of modern biology, chemistry and other disciplines.

One of the compromise amendments requires that students learn to “analyze, evaluate and critique scientific explanations in all fields of science.” That includes “examining all sides of scientific evidence of those scientific explanations so as to encourage critical thinking by the student.”

J. Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said “only genuinely scientific critiques of evolution should be taught in science class. Religious explanations of creation can be discussed in social studies, Bible-as-literature or comparative religion classes.”

At least six other states — Alabama, Minnesota, Missouri, New Mexico, Pennsylvania and South Carolina — have adopted science standards requiring students to learn how to evaluate aspects of evolutionary theory critically.

But Texas' decision is different, because it is one of the nation's largest markets for school textbooks. Textbook publishers, therefore, often write their texts to Texas standards.

Quinn said publishers will be faced with a Hobson's choice — write books to suit standards that a conservative Texas education board will approve the next time textbooks are chosen in 2011, or ignore the huge Texas market altogether. — ABP and staff reports



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Obama's faith-based council still finding its footing

WASHINGTON — Advisers tapped to help guide the White House's revamped faith-based office say their role is still evolving as the initiative expands its portfolio and tries to find its footing in the young Obama administration.

Initial members of the council, who were named in February, opened a two-day meeting with White House officials on April 6. An additional 9 members, who will round out the 25-member council, were also announced.

The overhaul of the office centers on an expanded mission to go beyond matching faith-based groups with government funds, advisory council members said in recent interviews. One of the biggest changes is asking religious leaders to help shape policy on a number of hot-button social issues, including abortion.

While some viewed the Bush administration's efforts mostly as a one-way directive on how to expand the reach of faith-based groups, Obama's unpaid advisers report more of a two-way dialogue. And the discussion centers on a broader array of issues that allows for more input from beyond the Beltway.

"The sense that you have is that there's really somebody who is listening to what you have to say and will take it into consideration," said one adviser, Bishop Vashti McKenzie, who oversees African Methodist Episcopal congregations in Tennessee and Kentucky.

She said the level of communication is "certainly a change from the Republican administration," and also, from the Clinton White House.

"There was some give-and-take," McKenzie said, "but not at this level."

The council is charged with helping shape policy in four areas: economic recovery, abortion reduction, inter-faith dialogue and responsible fatherhood. McKenzie, for example, plans to focus her work on the fatherhood program.

Other advisers said they were given a courtesy heads-up as Obama drafted his executive order permitting federal funding of stem cell research, or his nomination of Kansas Gov. Kathleen Sebelius as Health and Human Services secretary. When some members expressed concern about proposed reductions in charitable deductions or rescinding conscience protections for healthcare workers, the White House responded with explanations, they said.

Former Southern Baptist Convention President Frank Page, one of the advisers, said he has been surprised at the rapid pace of some policy decisions — many of which he has not agreed with — but believes his views were heard when he questioned the plan to rescind conscience protections for healthcare workers.

"I felt like there was some listening and some

response in that particular issue," he said.

The Rev. Larry Snyder, president of Catholic Charities USA and another adviser, said it was helpful when faith-based director Joshua DuBois got on the phone and explained the administration's position on charitable deductions.

"At the same time, we're all thinking, we'll see how it plays out," he said.

Richard Stearns, president of the evangelical relief agency World Vision and a member of the advisory council, said the

panel seems to have two roles: serving as "a council of elders" that can offer its expertise to the White House, and also representing their constituents to decision-makers.

"I think there's a broader tent, if you will, in this group," he said. "President Bush's faith-based office, right or wrong, was associated with evangelicals within the faith community. I think this group is broader and is including not just Christians of many stripes but also people of other faiths and people of no faith."

The Rev. Jim Wallis, leader of the anti-poverty group Sojourners and a panel adviser, said DuBois should be credited for communicating with people across a range of religious and ideological views.

"It's serious, open discussion," he said. "I think he's getting high marks from people from all sides for reaching out."

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism and a member of the advisory council, said the revamped office intends to continue the Bush plans for equal access to federal funding for social service groups, but the outreach from the Obama White House is more substantive.

"The number of conference calls, the number of just individual calls going back and forth, clearly is far greater," he said.

One aspect of the Bush office — partnering faith-based and community groups with federal funds — remains intact, but advisers stress they are not making the decisions on who is or is not funded.

Melissa Rogers, director of the Center for Religion and Public Affairs at Wake Forest University's School of Divinity and former Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel, is an adviser and has written a form letter to respond to the "scores" of people who contacted her thinking she has a role in giving out grants.

Monteiro, in his talk at Howard University's Divinity School, stressed that the advisory council to the office is just that — advisory.

"I think there's a misconception that this council is calling the shots," he said. "It's a one-year term because we want to make sure that there are different voices represented."

— RNS and staff reports



REFLECTIONS

'Capsule History' a study of being Baptist

"Baptists are a variegated people with a variegated past."

Thus begins a new book authored by William H. Brackney to commemorate and celebrate Baptists' 400th anniversary.

Yes, over the past four centuries— ever since John Smyth fled English persecution for Holland, baptized himself and then others in 1609, and joined up with some Waterlander Mennonites in Amsterdam— those who came to be known as "Baptizers" have been as diverse as any religious denomination or Christian tradition.

That is one reason Professor Brackney, a church historian who teaches at Acadia Divinity College in Nova Scotia, called his book *A Capsule History of Baptist Principles*. One cannot view Baptists monolithically. Brackney even hesitates to speak of the oft-heard "Baptist distinctives," because that may even claim too much. But, as Brackney points out, it says too little to argue that Baptists have no common theology. So, he chooses the word "principles." By this he means to capture recurring characteristics that give shape to a tradition and identify priorities and enduring concerns of Baptists—"denominational DNA" if you please. In short, in the midst of all this Baptist diversity, "enough believers over four centuries have exhibited commonalities that can now be called essential principles." (p.13)

In addition to embracing "principles," the book is aptly titled because it is a "capsule" (only 112 pages!) and because these principles are discussed in the context of "history." We 21st century Baptists —the second largest religious group in the United States (behind Catholics) and now spread across the world — cannot be understood apart from where we have been and what we have experienced. For example, Baptists' commitment to religious liberty and separation of church and state cannot be divorced from the persecution our forebears suffered in the past and many continue to endure in some places today.

Hence, the book is a wonderful short study of what it means to be Baptist in historical context.

So what are these principles that Brackney has come up with? He lists and discusses 11 of them. Some are quite predicable: The Lordship of Christ, The Authority of Scripture, A Believers' Church, Believer's Baptism and the Lord's

Supper, and the Independence of the Local Congregation. Others are somewhat less commonly mentioned in Baptist life including: The Importance of Religious Experience, The Missionary Imperative, The Associational Principle and Human Rights throughout the world.

Readers of this publication and column will appreciate that Brackney devotes considerable space to talking about religious freedom and the separation of church and state. He chronicles the Baptist fight for religious freedom from Thomas Helwys' incendiary call for full religious liberty in *A Short Declaration on the Mystery of Iniquity* (1612) (for which he was imprisoned and eventually lost his life) up to the present day battles fought by, among others, the Baptist Joint Committee. Brackney also discusses how some modern Baptists have lost their way and who want to claim the benefit (free exercise), but not the inconvenience (no establishment), of constitutional principles necessary to sustain religious freedom for all.

Finally, the book would be incomplete if it were only about history. In the final chapter, Brackney looks to the future of Baptist principles in this so-called post-modern, post-denominational era. Counseling that we must remain flexible and with an appropriate expectation that this variegated pattern will continue, Baptists must affirm the lordship of Jesus Christ. After all, Baptists are Christians, first and foremost. We must also recognize that religious freedom is a gift from God from which all other Baptist principles flow.

In short, this book provides the reader a friendly study of what it has meant to be Baptist over the past four centuries and where we go from here for all contemporary Baptists and Baptist churches.

The book is published by the Baptist History and Heritage Society. You can order the book by e-mailing Pam Durso at pamdurso@baptisthistory.org for \$14 per copy.



J. Brent Walker
Executive Director

"We 21st century Baptists —the second largest religious group in the United States (behind Catholics) and now spread across the world — cannot be understood apart from where we have been and what we have experienced."

State Dept. reveals list of religious freedom violators

WASHINGTON — More than two months after George W. Bush left the White House and Condoleezza Rice left the State Department, the agency has revealed its list of the world's worst religious freedom violators.

The big news is that nothing on it is new.

Inclusion on the list — created under the terms of the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act (IRFA) — enables the administration to institute measures designed to pressure those nations to improve their human rights conditions. But many religious freedom activists regularly criticized the Bush administration for acting too timidly in regard to some countries' violations of the freedom of conscience.

That is unlikely to change with the administration's final actions on international religious freedom. This year's list includes the same seven countries Rice named in 2006, the last time she designated CPCs. They are Burma, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, China, Saudi Arabia, Sudan and Uzbekistan.

Such a designation requires the administration either to implement measures designed to pressure the designated countries into improving human rights conditions or grant waivers if it is determined that it is not in U.S. interests to sanction the countries.

As she has in the past, Rice waived sanctions against Saudi Arabia and Uzbekistan. An independent federal panel charged with monitoring global religious freedom expressed dismay March 27 that Rice once again chose not to add any nations to the list and to issue the waivers.

"The commission is disappointed that Secretary Rice refused to designate any new countries and that waivers were granted for both Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia," said Felice Gaer, chair of the United States Commission on International Religious Freedom, in a prepared statement. "Religious freedom conditions in Uzbekistan and Saudi Arabia are appalling and a specific U.S. government response is required."

Rice formalized the designations Jan. 16 — just four days before leaving office — but did not make them public. According to the commission, they were only revealed after the panel sent an inquiry to Rice's successor, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

"In adopting IRFA, Congress recognized that CPC designation is an important tool in securing improvements in international religious freedom," said Gaer. "State Department efforts to negotiate with certain countries to bring about improvements in religious freedom certainly might be an appropriate reason for delaying CPC designation, but the commission con-



cludes that the State Department should have acted years ago in the case of a number of the countries our commission recommended for CPC designation, under our statutory authority."

The panel has repeatedly recommended several other nations that the administration has chosen not to include on the CPC list. They include Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Vietnam.

Vietnam is the only nation to have been designated a CPC and then removed from the list. The State Department first declared Vietnam an egregious violator of religious liberty in 2004, and then removed it in 2006, citing progress in religious freedom conditions there. USCIRF officials criticized the removal, saying Vietnam had not shown sufficient improvement for removal from the CPC list.

The bipartisan panel also recommended Iraq for CPC designation late last year, after political wrangling rare for a body that usually makes its decisions by consensus.

Whether the new administration is more responsive to the commission's concerns remains to be seen. Clinton and President Obama have signaled a more pragmatic approach to foreign policy than their predecessors, but also must answer to a constituency vocal on human rights issues.

"As it reviews the previous administration's CPC designations, we hope the Obama administration will recognize the added value that CPC status can bring to American public diplomacy on human rights," Gaer said.

— ABP

Group opposes state funds for Baptist school

A church-state watchdog group says the Kentucky Supreme Court should strike down a \$10 million state appropriation to build a pharmacy school at Baptist-owned University of the Cumberlands, claiming it uses taxpayer funds to advance a particular religion.

Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed a friend-of-the-court brief March 31 urging the commonwealth's high court to uphold a March 2008 ruling by a special judge that the funding constitutes "a direct payment to a non-public religious school for educational purposes." Such payments, the judge concluded, are not permitted by the Kentucky Constitution.

The AU brief traces the development of the doctrine of church-state separation in the United States in general and Kentucky in particular. It says the Kentucky Constitution is "clear and unambiguous" that government cannot show preference to religious institutions or appropriate public funds for educational purposes at private religious schools.

Formerly called Cumberland College, the University of the Cumberlands is affiliated with the Kentucky Baptist Convention. Founded by Baptist ministers in 1889, the school has historically served students primarily from the collective mountain regions of Kentucky, Tennessee, West Virginia, Virginia, Georgia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Ohio and Alabama traditionally known as Appalachia.

In 2006 Kentucky's General Assembly appropriated funds to begin

a school of pharmacy there, so students from the area would not have to travel as far to get a pharmacological education. Legislators reasoned the action would also make it more likely they would remain close to home to pursue their careers.

The idea quickly lost popularity with some lawmakers, however, after the school kicked out a student for moral misconduct after he posted on a social-networking site that he was gay and dating a student at another school.

Sen. Ernesto Scorsone, D-Lexington,

an openly gay member of the Kentucky General Assembly, said unless funding for the pharmacy school is stopped, "We will have a state benefit that is only available to heterosexuals."

Cumberlands President Jim Taylor responded with a statement saying students know before they come to the university they are expected to maintain different standards than in society in general.

"University of the Cumberlands isn't for everyone," Taylor said. "We are different by design and are non-apologetic about our Christian beliefs."

Proponents of the funding argue it is constitutional to grant tax dollars to religious organizations as long as they are intended for the health and welfare of all citizens.

The AU brief, however, contends that the proposed funding would constitute an "educational" benefit going directly to the university and its students, which the commonwealth's charter forbids, as opposed to a "public health" benefit like a hospital,

which is open to anyone.

One of the plaintiffs in the lawsuit challenging funding for the pharmacy school is Paul Simmons, a Baptist minister and president of the Americans United board of trustees

Simmons, former longtime professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, told Associated Baptist Press that some of the people pushing for the pharmacy school also support recent "conscience" laws enacted in some states that allow pharmacists to refuse to dispense birth-control pills to women on moral grounds.

Simmons said such measures particularly affect reproductive choices of poor women, who are less likely to be able to go somewhere else if their pharmacist refuses to fill their prescription.

Currently clinical professor of ethics and professionalism at the University of Louisville School of Medicine, Simmons pointed out in an article for the *Oates Journal* that such protections apply to all oral contraceptives and not just those designed to abort an embryo after fertilization.

Simmons said that means if a woman believes there is nothing morally wrong with contraception but goes to a pharmacist who disagrees on theological grounds, the pharmacist has power to trump her individual conscience.

Recent guests at University of the Cumberlands include the so-called "Ten Commandments Judge," former Alabama Chief Justice Roy Moore, who spoke at a "moral leadership" program in 2006, and former Sen. Zell Miller, D-Ga., the only person ever to give keynote speeches at both the Democratic and Republican national conventions, for a "patriotic leadership" event in 2007.

The university's non-discrimination policy includes "race, color, nationality, ethnic origin, sex, age or handicap." That could become another issue if a future pharmacy school were to seek accreditation. The Accreditation Council for Pharmacy Education amended its standards in 2007 to add sexual orientation to discrimination guidelines.

— ABP





James Gibson
Staff Counsel

Crosses become focus of new religious display cases

“Government sponsored religious displays wrongly assume religion needs the assistance of government to flourish, leaves religion vulnerable to the changing political whims of public officials and invites the misuse of religion for political purposes.”

The cross is a sacred Christian symbol. Most commonly, it marks places of worship, but it also is displayed by Christians in myriad other ways. Recently the cross has also become a focal point of litigation challenging the constitutionality of religious displays on public lands.

Generally, the BJC opposes government displays of crosses. Government sponsored religious displays wrongly assume religion needs the assistance of government to flourish, leaves religion vulnerable to the changing political whims of public officials and invites the misuse of religion for political purposes. We have long maintained that religious symbols are best left to persons of faith.

Three cross cases are now in various stages of the federal court system, and any one may result in the next landmark decision on government-sponsored religious displays.

This fall, the U.S. Supreme Court hears arguments in *Salazar v. Buono*. This case arises from a dispute over a large cross on land owned by the National Park Service in California’s Mojave National Preserve. When the Park Service refused to allow Buddhists to erect a shrine near the cross and announced plans to remove the cross, Congress tried to cure an Establishment Clause problem by transferring the portion of land where the cross stood to a private party. Frank Buono, a retired Park Service employee, sued and ultimately prevailed in the 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which held that Congress could not avoid the constitutional problem by cutting a “donut-sized hole” in a vast expanse of federal land. The Supreme Court will consider whether Congress’s actions violated the Establishment Clause, and whether Buono had legal standing to bring the case.

Trunk v. City of San Diego, currently pending in the 9th Circuit, involves a cross sitting prominently atop a veterans’ memorial on Mt. Soledad, near San Diego, Calif. As in *Buono*, Congress got involved after a federal judge ordered the cross’s removal and enacted legislation to transfer the land. More litigation followed, and the district court ruled that

Congress’s primary purpose was to preserve the site as a veterans’ memorial, not to advance or favor a particular religion. It held further that displaying a cross is not inherently religious, and that the cross has the primary effect of promoting patriotism, not religion.

Another cross case, *American Atheists, Inc. v. Duncan*, is under consideration in the 10th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. It arises from a privately funded program in Utah where crosses are erected in memory of state Highway Patrol troopers who died in the line of duty. Because some of the crosses are located on public land, American Atheists sued, requesting that the crosses be removed or have the Highway Patrol’s logo excised from them. A federal judge ruled that the crosses were not inherently religious, but were instead an internationally recognized symbol used to honor the deceased. This stark ruling was met with skepticism during oral arguments in the 10th Circuit, where one judge noted that Utah’s saying that the crosses are not religious does not necessarily make it so.

The impact of these cases will depend on how the courts – ultimately, the U.S. Supreme Court – answer some key questions. Two 2005 decisions, *McCreary County, Ky. v. ACLU* and *Van Orden v. Perry*, both decided 5-4, established that Ten Commandments monument displays on government property are constitutional in limited circumstances.

How, if at all, are cross displays different from Ten Commandments monument displays? Will the Court further restrict standing rules to prevent having to rule on the merits in *Buono*? Will the Court distinguish between individual (as in the Utah case) and corporate (as in the two California cases) cross markers? Will the Court, like the federal judge in *Duncan*, weigh in on the meaning of the cross?

These questions will be in play when the High Court hears *Buono*, but due to changes on the Court, larger issues about Establishment Clause jurisprudence are also implicated. Since the Ten Commandments cases in 2005, Justice Sandra Day O’Connor has been replaced by Justice Samuel Alito. Constitutional scholars have speculated that Justice Alito could provide a fifth vote to sharply curtail Establishment Clause protections. It remains to be seen if that will occur, or if the Court will continue to interpret the Establishment Clause as a strong guarantee of religious liberty.

'Semester in Washington' participant interns with the Baptist Joint Committee

Karen Evans, of Oxford, N.C., is a religious studies and history graduate from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. She interned with the Baptist Joint Committee during the Spring semester as part of the Semester in Washington Program through Georgetown University's School of Continuing Studies. The program joins academic studies with valuable, practical work experience.



Evans

She is the daughter of Roy and Jean Evans.

Court says church can brew hallucinogenic tea

PORTLAND, Ore. — A church in Ashland, Ore., can import and brew a hallucinogenic tea for its religious services, under a federal court ruling issued March 19.

Judge Owen M. Panner issued a permanent injunction that bars the federal government from penalizing or prohibiting the Church of the Holy Light of the Queen from sacramental use of "Daime" tea.

The church, which blends Christian and Brazilian indigenous beliefs, uses tea brewed from the ayahuasca plant in their services. The tea contains trace amounts of the chemical dimethyltryptamine, or DMT.

According to the church's lawsuit, the tea is the central ritual and sacrament of the religion where members believe "only by taking the tea can a church member have direct experience with Jesus Christ."

The Ashland church filed its suit against the federal Department of Justice and Treasury Department in February arguing that the tea should be allowed under the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Panner ruled that federal drug enforcement agencies are prevented from prosecuting the church for importing, possessing and distributing the tea and as long as they abide by the judge's guidelines.

— RNS

ACLU, faith groups protest restrictions on prison books

A coalition of religious organizations and the American Civil Liberties Union have joined forces to protest a proposed rule by the federal Bureau of Prisons to allow officials to ban religious materials from prison chapel libraries if they could possibly promote "violence or criminal activity."

A 14-page letter — signed by leaders of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, American Jewish Congress, Muslim Advocates, United Methodist Church, Seventh-day Adventists and others — was submitted March 17 to the Bureau of Prisons General Counsel.

"Distributing and reading religious material is as protected under the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution as

worshipping in churches or preaching from the pulpits," said David Shapiro, the staff attorney for the ACLU's National Prison Project. "It is not the role of the government to dictate what is religiously acceptable."

The outcry comes two years after federal prison officials were widely criticized for trying to push a list of "acceptable materials" that restricted several popular books, including megachurch pastor Rick Warren's "The Purpose-Driven Life."

Anger over that move prompted Congress to pass the Second Chance Act, which forbids prisons from restricting access to religious materials — with an exception for works that could incite criminal behavior.

The ACLU and others are concerned that under the proposed rule, prison officials would have the power to confiscate sacred texts or other works that could, in one way or another, be interpreted to promote violence. Critics say it is not the bureau's role to make that determination.

If the prison board decides to approve the rule, the coalition recommends that prison chaplains be consulted before any works are removed; prisoners be given at least 20 days notice prior to the removal of each work, to allow for filing grievances; and that publishers be notified when their works are banned.

— RNS

Proposed Conn. law on church governance dies

A controversial Connecticut bill that would have restructured the Catholic Church and given parishioners more control of financial decisions has been shelved after an uproar from Catholic officials and church-state separationists.

A committee in Connecticut's General Assembly on March 10 withdrew the bill, which was inspired by high-profile parish thefts by Catholic priests, including one who was convicted in 2007 of stealing \$1.3 million from his Darien parish.

Joint Judiciary Committee co-chairman Sen. Andrew McDonald and Rep. Mike Lawlor, both Democrats, said current Connecticut laws, which have separate provisions for various denominations, "appear to us to be unconstitutional."

"If that is correct, any changes to that law would likely also be unconstitutional," the lawmakers said in a joint statement.

McDonald and Lawlor called on Connecticut Attorney General Richard Blumenthal to review whether current laws are constitutional.

The scuttled bill would have removed financial control of local churches from diocesan bishops and empowered parish councils stocked with lay Catholics.

Several bishops, as well as the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, castigated the bill on March 11.

"This bill is not even close to constitutional," said Anthony Picarello, the USCCB's general counsel. "It targets the Catholic Church explicitly and exclusively, and it inserts the state into theological controversies regarding how the Church should be structured and governed."

— RNS