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REPORT
from the Capital

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◆ 2010 Shurden Lectures ◆

A new examination of church-state issues

Make your plans to travel to Birmingham, Ala., on April 27-28 to be a part of this year's **Walter B. and Kay W. Shurden Lectures on Religious Liberty and Separation of Church and State**. The speaker for 2010 will be Dr. **Martin E. Marty**, the University of Chicago's Fairfax M. Cone Distinguished Service Professor Emeritus of the History of Modern Christianity in the Divinity School. Marty is a prominent interpreter of religion and culture and the author of more than 50 books.



Marty

Marty will deliver three lectures revolving around the theme of "Reconceiving Church-State Issues with New Assists from the Founders."

At 10 a.m. on April 27, Marty's first lecture will take a cue from French political thinker Montesquieu as he speaks on "Not Privileging the Privileging of Religion." At 4 p.m. the same day, Marty will talk about "The Difference Indifference Can Make," using Benjamin Franklin's thoughts on the voluntary contributions that gave rise to religion in our country. The final lecture is set for 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, April 28. Using James Madison's words on tracing a "line of separation between the rights of religion and the Civil authority," Marty will speak on "Tracing Lines, not Building

Walls."

The lectures are free and open to the public. Members of the Baptist Joint Committee staff will attend, and all students and community members are invited to visit the Samford University campus to hear Marty speak. If you know a Samford student or Birmingham resident, be sure to let him or her know about this exciting opportunity to hear one of the leading voices on the intersection of religion and public life.

If you can make the journey to Birmingham, we would love to see you there! Come for as many lectures as you would like, and feel free to bring friends or neighbors who would be interested. A group from your church could even make a day of it, bringing a church van or bus to Samford University to enjoy the campus and engage with Marty



A.H. Reid Chapel at Samford University

and members of the BJC staff. The event is also a great way to introduce your friends to the work of the BJC.

No reservations are required, but if you have any questions, feel free to call us at (202) 544-4226 or e-mail Jeff Huett at jhuett@BJCOnline.org.



REPORT

from the Capital

Watching the states in 2010

While church-state issues at the national level tend to dominate media coverage about religious liberty, decisions made in city councils, local courthouses and state legislatures can also have a major impact. States across the country will be dealing with a range of issues related to religious liberty this year.



of religious pluralism in the United States. Church-state advocates are concerned because board members appointed David Barton — an outspoken “Christian nation” advocate — to an “expert” advisory panel. The board’s next meeting is set for March, and a final vote likely will be in May.

Situations involving the constitutionality of religious displays on government property often begin in state legislatures. In Arizona, a state lawmaker filed a bill in the 2010 session that would require a copy of the Ten Commandments to be placed on the front entrance of the original Arizona Capitol.

Oregon’s legislature began debating a bill in February that would grant teachers more religious freedom in the classroom by allowing them to wear religious clothing on the job. An Oregon law specifically forbids public school teachers from doing just that. At press time, the bill had passed the Oregon House.

Meanwhile, in Oklahoma, the state is moving forward with a law passed in 2009 that allows a privately funded Ten Commandments monument to be placed on the state capitol grounds. No timeline has been set for construction, but the monument could be in place before the end of 2010. The bill allowing the monument also specifically laid out plans for a private organization to defend any legal challenges to it, preparing the state for such litigation.

Educational funding also can become a battle over religious liberty at the state level. Nine members of the Vermont legislature are co-sponsoring a bill that would allow public school districts to pay tuition to “approved independent schools with a religious affiliation.” In New Jersey, Gov. Jon Corzine created the Non-Public Education Funding Commission a few weeks before he left office. This group will, among other things, look for ways to abate the high cost of private school tuition without violating church-state separation and other legal limitations.

Fights for and against religious displays are but one of the methods state governments impact religious liberty.

“A keen awareness of events happening in states and local communities is the vital first step to protecting religious liberty,” said J. Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. “Staying plugged in to the issues happening in your part of the country allows you to know when it’s time to stand up for a bill, oppose legislation, contact your representative or pen a letter to the editor. There is no need to wait until these issues make national news or reach the U.S. Supreme Court.”

When the state of Minnesota gave federal money to a faith-based organization called “Teen Challenge,” it sparked a debate about whether the government was funding religious training. The organization’s mission statement includes a goal to provide a “comprehensive Christian faith-based solution” that helps individuals overcome life-controlling problems.

If you have a question about the potential religious liberty implications of an issue in your state, the BJC is a resource for you.

In Texas, the State Board of Education will continue to debate the state’s social studies curriculum. The board is reviewing textbook standards, including recommendations to place more emphasis on the role of the Bible and Christianity in American history while de-emphasizing key elements

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On the Web

www.BJConline.org
www.BJConline.org/blog



@BJContheHill

—Cherilyn Crowe

Military contractor to pull Bible verses from weapons

A Michigan military contractor said Jan. 21 it will remove encoded Scripture references on weapons it builds for U.S. military after a firestorm of complaints arose from both believers and atheists.

"Trijicon has proudly served the U.S. military for more than two decades, and our decision to offer to voluntarily remove these references is both prudent and appropriate," said Stephen Bindon, president and CEO of Trijicon Inc., which is based in Wixom, Mich.

"We want to thank the Department of Defense for the opportunity to work with them and will move as quickly as possible to provide the modification kits for deployment overseas."

ABC News' *Nightline* reported Jan. 18 on the biblical references on weapons used by soldiers in Afghanistan and Iraq after learning about them from the Military Religious Freedom Foundation, a watchdog group.

One rifle sight included the code "JN8:12," a reference to the Gospel of John in which Jesus says, "He who follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Mikey Weinstein, founder of the watchdog group, hailed the decision by the Michigan company.

"Trijicon's outrageous practice of placing Bible verse citations on military-issued gunsights for weapons was an unconstitutional disgrace of the highest magnitude to our military and an action that clearly gave additional incentive and emboldenment to recruiters for our nation's enemies," he said.

The military contractor said it took action "in response to concerns raised by the Department of Defense."

But before the action was taken, a chorus of individuals from groups across the religious spectrum called for the removal of the Scripture references.

Faith in America, an online interfaith community, asked its supporters to sign an online petition to the Pentagon.

"As Americans of faith, we call on our military leaders to remove weapons with religious markings as soon as possible," the petition reads. "Putting religious messages on tools of war is an abuse of faith and threatens our security."

The Rev. Welton Gaddy, president of the Interfaith

Alliance, urged President Obama on Jan. 21 to launch a thorough investigation "aimed at creating guidelines that ensure that religion no longer plays an inappropriate role in our armed forces."

Gaddy said the controversy affects soldiers regardless of their religious affiliation.

"Trijicon's actions should be of concern to people of all faiths including Christians, but it is particularly appalling that soldiers who do not practice Christianity have been unknowingly wielding weaponry ... that preaches the merits of a religion to which they do not adhere," Gaddy said.

Don Byrd, the blogger at the Baptist Joint Committee's *Blog from the Capital*, discussed the negative impression that could be made by a military using guns with coded Scripture references.

"Apart from giving the inaccurate and harmful impression that the U.S. military is engaged in a holy crusade, this company insults non-Christian soldiers," wrote Byrd.

Kathleen Johnson, vice president and military director for American Atheists, said the religious inscriptions violate the First Amendment as well as military regulations.

"These rifle sights should be phased out of use as quickly as possible," said Johnson. "The mission of the U.S. military cannot include proselytizing for Christianity or any other religion."

Muslim groups had also written to the Pentagon decrying the encoded weapons, with the Muslim Public Affairs Council saying they are "unacceptable" and the Council on American-Islamic Relations seeking their withdrawal "as soon as logistically possible."

— Religion News Service and Staff Reports



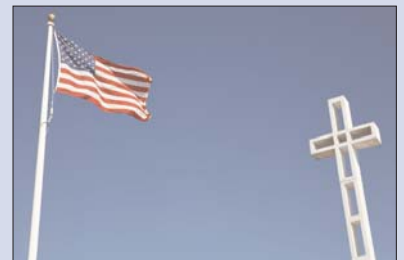
Time is running out!

Scholarship entries due March 1

The Baptist Joint Committee is accepting essay submissions for its scholarship contest through March 1. All high school juniors and seniors are eligible to enter the contest, which has a grand prize of \$1,000 and a trip for two to Washington, D.C. Second prize is \$500, and third prize is \$100.

To enter, students must submit an essay between 800-1,200 words discussing John F. Kennedy's 1960 speech about the relationship between his religion and his politics, the implications of his speech and how the principles he laid out are — or are not — followed by politicians and other leaders 50 years later.

The topic, rules and entry forms are available online at www.BJConline.org/contest.



REFLECTIONS

Religious liberty in China

This past October, I visited China as a part of an American-Chinese Multi-Faith Religious Exchange that was sponsored by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Forest Hills Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., and the Baptist Joint Committee. For nearly two weeks, 13 of us — Baptist, Methodist, Catholic, Muslim and Buddhist — met with our counterpart Chinese religious leaders as well as governmental officials to discuss religion and religious liberty both in China and the United States. I also welcomed the opportunity to present two papers on religious liberty and pluralism in the United States to Chinese scholars in Beijing and Shanghai.

Evaluating the state of religion and religious liberty in China is a dicey endeavor. It is often said that everything you hear about China is probably true somewhere in China. China's 1.3 billion population with 56 ethnic groups strewn across the Asian continent with several millennia of history almost defies generalization.

Religion, qua religion, is thriving. We have seen dramatic growth in numbers and vibrancy of religion generally and Christian churches specifically — both registered and house churches. Believe it or not, today there are more Christians in China than members of the Chinese Communist Party. Clearly, the Gospel has burgeoned in the aftermath of the Cultural Revolution and the re-opening of churches in 1979.

But what about religious *liberty*? Here, there is bad news and good news. The bad news first.

The Chinese constitution protects only "freedom of religious *belief*" and "normal religious activity." This generally means state-regulated "patriotic religious associations" (Buddhist, Taoist, Muslim, Catholic and Protestant) have the right to worship unmolested and to proselytize within the four walls of their house of worship — but not on the street corner outside of it. The extent to which various folk religions, other denominational traditions and unregistered religious organizations are free to worship varies from region to region. All of this is to say that *some* religion is *sometimes* "tolerated" in China; there is no right to unvarnished religious expression and proselytizing in the public square or to level a robust religious critique of government. Religion is permitted to exist and is sometimes actually promoted (the state often pays for the purchase of land for churches and seminaries) when the state judges it will spawn what the Chinese call the "harmonious society." Beyond this, groups the state considers "evil religions," such as the Falun Gong or ones that are deemed to be splitist, like the Tibetan Buddhists, or supporting terrorism, like Muslim Uighurs in Xinjiang, are often persecuted.

But here is the good news. China has been working on religious liberty for only about 30 years; in this country, we have been at it for nearly 300 years and still do not always get the church-state equation right. Chinese culture throughout its history has been hierarchical, authoritarian and communal. As a result, the Chinese are not used to thinking about individual rights. They will always be more interested in promoting the "harmonious society" over the sometimes cacophonous clash of individualism, but progress is being made. Seminaries in China — including the Jinling Seminary in Nanjing that we visited — enjoy a modest degree of academic freedom. The printing and distribution of Bibles is rampant. The Amity Printing Company, which we also toured, puts out about 1.5 million Bibles each month, as well as other religious literature. Although retrograde forces exist in the Chinese Communist Party and the State Administration for Religious Affairs, some government officials are working within the system to help expand the vistas of religious liberty. That our delegation was invited in the first place and given fairly wide latitude to promote religious freedom by critiquing the Chinese system is evidence of this fact.

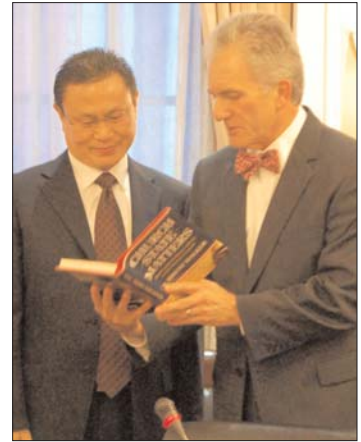
China does not turn on a dime. It never has in 4,000 years and will not now. Nor will China respond to dire threats and embarrassing diatribes about its shortcomings on the religious freedom front. It must "save face" at all costs.

We need to continue to build relationships with the Chinese — religious leaders and government officials alike. We should press for more religious liberty. The message that I promoted in China is that when religious people are a demonstrable threat — splitist, terrorist or otherwise harmful to the well-being of others — then government can legitimately take steps to rein it in, but carefully and not before. In the end, full fledged religious liberty will actually *promote* a "harmonious society" more than divisive governmental intervention into the religious demography — favoring some, disfavoring others and persecuting many.

Religious liberty is good for both religion and the state — and that goes for China, too.




J. Brent Walker
Executive Director



Brent Walker presents a copy of his book, *Church -State Matters*, to the Rev. Gao Feng of the China Christian Council.



American religious leaders visit Hong Kong University.



MAY RELIGIOUS GROUPS AND PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN THE DEBATE OF PUBLIC ISSUES?

Yes. Religious individuals and groups, like non-religious individuals and

groups, have a right to participate in the debate on all issues that are important to political and civic life. As the Supreme Court said in 1970:

“Adherents of particular faiths and individual churches frequently take strong positions on public issues ... Of course, churches as much as secular bodies and private citizens have that right.”

For example, religious leaders and

organizations frequently take positions on legislative bills, and they sometimes boycott certain corporations or launch media campaigns about their congregations or about public issues.

This kind of activity usually is protected by the First Amendment. Note that, if an entity wishes to qualify for and maintain status as a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization, then it will need to comply

Religious individuals and groups ... have a right to participate in the debate on all issues.

with certain restrictions on its political activities that apply to all 501(c)(3) organizations (whether religious or not), including the activities described in questions and answers 9 through 11 of [the] statement. ■



MAY RELIGIOUS BELIEFS INFORM PUBLIC POLICY?

Government officials' religious beliefs may inform their policy decisions so long as

advancing religion is not the predominant purpose or primary effect of governmental action. In other words, the predominant purpose and primary effect of

governmental action must be nonreligious (secular) in nature. When the Supreme Court considers whether a governmental action has a permissible purpose, it says that the government's “stated reasons [for its actions] will generally get deference, [but] the secular purpose required has to be genuine, not a sham, and not merely secondary to a religious objective.”

In cases where the Supreme Court has found an impermissible purpose for government action, it says it has done so because “openly available data

supported a commonsense conclusion that a religious objective permeated the government's action.” For an example of a governmental action that had an impermissible purpose, see the discussion of the *McCreary County v. ACLU* case in

question and answer 20 of [the] statement.

The mere fact that a law coincides with religious tenets does not mean it violates the religion clauses of the


Constitution. For example, just because various religious teachings oppose stealing does not mean that the government may not enact laws prohibiting larceny. And the Supreme Court has found that a federal statute that denied government funding for certain medically necessary abortions did not violate the Constitution. The Court said that, although the law “coincide[d] with” certain religious tenets, it had a secular purpose, neither advanced nor inhibited religion and did not foster excessive government entanglement with religion. ■

... Religious beliefs may inform [officials'] policy decisions so long as advancing religion is not the predominant purpose or primary effect of governmental action.

Common


Groups seek on the st

At a 2006 meeting in Chicago di
diverse group of participants c
tions on issues related to religious
released “Religious Expression in
Current Law,” which includes ans



IS THE MOTTO “IN GOD WE TRUST” FOUND ON OUR MONEY UNCONSTITUTIONAL?

While this motto is sometimes subject to litigation, several Supreme Court opinions discuss the motto approvingly. For example, in 1963, Justice Brennan wrote: “The truth is that we have simply interwoven the motto so deeply into the fabric of our civil polity that its present use may well not present that type of involvement [of government with religion] which the First Amendment prohibits.” Further, all lower federal courts that have considered challenges to the motto have upheld its constitutionality. This does not mean, however, that any and all official uses of “In God We Trust” would be constitutional. For example, the use of the motto in a public school classroom would be subject to a different analysis. ■



MAY MILITARY AND PRISON AUTHORITIES HIRE CHAPLAINS?

The Supreme Court has not ruled on the constitutionality of the military chaplaincy, but lower courts have upheld it.

Indeed, given the isolation some service members experience, the Free Exercise Clause of the First Amendment may affirmatively require the state to provide chaplains in certain circumstances.

Military chaplains perform a variety of duties. For example, they conduct worship services, lead devotional studies, provide counseling and administer rites for

those who seek such services.

A federal statute provides that when chaplains conduct worship services for service members who choose to attend such services, the chaplain may preach and pray “according to the manner and forms of the church of which he is a member.” Sometimes military chaplains are also invited to offer prayers and remarks at certain nonreligious military ceremonies, where attendance is mandatory for some service members. There is ongoing debate both within and outside the military branches about whether, in those settings, chaplains may use terms that are exclusive to one faith in their prayers and remarks — or even whether they may offer prayers or religious remarks at all in these con-

... Given the isolation some service members experience, the Free Exercise Clause ... may affirmatively require the state to provide chaplains in certain circumstances.

Common Ground

... find agreement on the state of the law

... discussing the future of religious freedom, a drafting committee decided to draft a document addressing questions of religious expression in the public square. In 2010, they released *Religious Expression in American Public Life: A Joint Statement of Current Law* in response to 35 questions. Five are printed here.



MAY INDIVIDUAL GRAVESTONES OR MARKERS IN GOVERNMENT CEMETERIES DISPLAY RELIGIOUS SYMBOLS CHOSEN BY THE DECEASED OR THEIR FAMILIES?

Yes. For example, many of the graves of service members in Arlington National Cemetery are marked with religious or nonreligious symbols that were chosen by the service members or their families from a list of emblems that have been approved for placement on these graves by the federal government. The federal government adds new symbols to this list from time to time. The government must refrain from any preference for some faiths over others in this approval process. As discussed in questions and answers 19 through 21 of [the] statement, when the government itself chooses to place particular religious symbols and sayings on monuments or showcase them in displays, the legal analysis is different. ■

texts.

The Supreme Court has not ruled on the constitutionality of the prison chaplaincy, but lower courts have held that the government may also hire chaplains to serve in this context. Here too, the law may require the state to make chaplains available to prisoners in some cases. If special provisions like these were not made, many prisoners might be unable to engage in certain forms of worship or other religious practices.

Even in these contexts, however, the predominant purpose or primary effect of the government's actions may not be the promotion of one religious view over others, and it may not coerce adherence to any particular set of beliefs. ■



Drafting committee member Colby May from the ACLJ, project leader Melissa Rogers, syndicated columnist E.J. Dionne and drafting committee member Marc Stern from the American Jewish Congress listen to BJC General Counsel Holly Hollman's presentation.

The drafting committee

The members of the drafting committee represent a wide range of expertise and viewpoints. While many of them disagree how the law *should* address these issues, they do agree on what the law *is* today. They all share a conviction that religious liberty is a fundamental right for all people, religious and nonreligious.

Robert A. Destro
Nathan J. Diamant
W. Cole Durham, Jr.
Maha Elgenaidi
Richard T. Foltin
Steven Freeman
Steven K. Green
Jeremy Gunn
Charles C. Haynes
Rev. N. J. L'Heureux, Jr.
K. Hollyn Hollman
Richard Land
Michael Lieberman
Shabbir Mansuri
Colby M. May

Mark Pelavin
Isabelle Kinnard Richman
Melissa Rogers
Rabbi David Saperstein
Judith E. Schaeffer
Steven Sheinberg
Rajwant Singh
Kara H. Stein
Marc D. Stern
Oliver Thomas
Mitchell Tyner
J. Brent Walker
Kimberly Winston



Access it online



Religious Expression in American Public Life: A Joint Statement of Current Law is available online from the Web site of the Wake Forest University Divinity School's Center for Religion and Public Affairs at <http://divinity.wfu.edu/rpa>. The Web site contains a downloadable PDF of the full statement, as well as information on the drafting committee and endorsements. ■



Marv Knox
Guest Columnist

Strong shield against persecution

Claims of persecution always deliver a jolt. That's especially true when a U.S. Christian aspires to be the persecutee. In this context, "persecution" typically means one of three things: Either somebody disagreed with this particular Christian's beliefs and said so. (What godless rudeness!) Somebody snickered at her religious behavior. (How mean!) Or someone with authority refused to allow him to exert his religious will upon others. (What's this country coming to?)

Such protests of persecution might appear perplexing or peculiar. Primarily they're paranoid and provincial.

Almost 70 percent of the planet's population live where religion is highly restricted. Shocking as it may sound, zoning ordinances in American suburbs, banned Scripture signs at public school ball-games and store clerks who say, "Happy Holidays" don't make the list. We're talking about places where people are beaten, imprisoned, banned from the marketplace, denied education and even killed because of their faith. Beside them, U.S. Christians' claims of persecution are pathetic.

As you might expect, one of the worst perpetrators is China, whose government is atheistic. Interestingly, however, the vast majority of religious persecution takes place in countries that are overtly religious. They're all for practicing religion—but only their religion, observed only their way. The most strident are countries politically and/or socially dominated by Islam or some strains of Orthodox Christianity.

Counter-intuitively, U.S. Christians who play the persecution card often argue against the policies and principles that ensure not only their religious freedom, but the dream that their great-great grandchildren will have the opportunity to worship and live out faith as they do today.

American religion is protected by the first two clauses of the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting the free exercise thereof." Thanks to

the 14th Amendment, which applied all Constitutional rights to the states, this means no U.S. government can fund or promote religion, but neither can it limit religious practice.

Christians who rail against the status of American religion usually fault principles embedded in the Establishment Clause. Ironically, although these people tend to distrust government, the logical consequence of their desire is government involvement in religion. A couple of examples are public school sponsorship of prayers and government funding of faith-based initiatives. The records of

other countries illustrate the dire consequences of such action: They range from the anemic state-sponsored churches of Western Europe, where vital faith languishes, to the predatory state-sanctioned religions of Eastern

Europe and the Middle East, where persecution predominates.

To a lesser extent, some U.S. Christians decry the Free Exercise Clause. This particularly is true when religion seems just plain weird, such as polygamous sects and animal-sacrificing cults. But it's also true when religion feels threatening, such as mosques presided over by radical imams.

To ensure religious liberty, not only now but for their descendants, U.S. Christians should support the First Amendment and organizations that protect it. That includes organizations that share tenets of their faith, such as the Baptist Joint Committee, and even ones with which they sometimes might disagree, such as Americans United and the Interfaith Alliance.

Any nation's religious freedom is only as secure as the liberty afforded its minorities. So, to ensure America never succumbs to religious persecution, we must protect our minorities. If this doesn't appeal to you as a deeply moral, intrinsically ethical and historically Baptist endeavor, then let it appeal to your self-interest. Contemplate the possibility your Christian descendants will be in the minority.

Marv Knox is editor of the Baptist Standard, the weekly newsjournal of Texas Baptists. This article originally ran in its January 1, 2010 edition.

"Any nation's religious freedom is only as secure as the liberty afforded its minorities."

BJC welcomes spring semester intern

The Baptist Joint Committee is pleased to welcome Amanda Burley as our second spring semester intern to work alongside our staff in Washington, D.C.

Burley is a 2005 graduate of Stanford University where she earned a political science degree with a concentration in American politics. She is active in Native American economic development, and she is considering a return to law school in the coming year.

The Dallas, Texas, native is the daughter of Jim and Hattie Burley of Mounds, Okla. Burley is a member of Snake Creek Indian Baptist Church in Bixby, Okla.



Burley

Court says Ky. courthouse can keep Ten Commandments display

A federal appeals court ruled on Jan. 14 that a Kentucky county courthouse can keep its Ten Commandments display, overturning a lower court ruling.

The "Foundations of American Law and Government Display" at a Grayson County, Ky., courthouse included the biblical laws along with eight other historical documents. It was challenged by two men who thought its placement violated the Constitution's prohibition against the government establishing a religion.

In a 2-1 decision, a panel of the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals disagreed, saying the display presented an educational, not religious message.

"There is nothing about the setting of the display that would be viewed as encouraging or lending itself to prayer, meditation or other religious activity," wrote Circuit Judge David W. McKeague for the majority.

He said the men challenging the display, who were represented by the American Civil Liberties Union, "failed to present evidence sufficient to demonstrate that an objective observer could have concluded that the county's asserted secular purpose was a sham."

In a dissenting opinion, Circuit Judge Karen Nelson Moore disagreed with that conclusion, calling the county's claimed purpose "a sham" that "should be rejected." She also wrote, "The evidence ... clearly indicates that the predominant purpose was to post the Ten Commandments as a religious text and that the additional 'Historical Documents' were added merely to avoid violating the Constitution."

The ruling was the latest in the ongoing legal battle over the Ten Commandments in Grayson County. At press time, media reports said the ACLU had yet to decide if it will appeal the decision.

— *Religion News Service and Staff Reports*

Tennessee school district agrees to stop handing out Bibles

A school district in Tennessee has agreed to stop handing out Gideon Bibles to students during the school day under threat of a lawsuit by the American Civil Liberties Union.

The Tennessee chapter of the ACLU wrote Wilson County school officials in October on behalf of parents of a fifth-grade student who objected to their daughter feeling pressured to come forward and take a Bible with fellow students.

The parents, who were not identified by the ACLU, said their daughter was brought into a school gym with other fifth graders during the school day for a presentation by a representative of The Gideons International. The organization is known for placing Bibles in hotel rooms and handing out free New Testaments in various public settings around the world.

The girl's teacher announced she would be calling students by row to come forward and take a Bible from a basket. After returning to the classroom the teacher instructed students to write their names in their Bible.

While the teacher told students it was not mandatory for them to take a Bible, the ACLU said the girl did so only because she feared being embarrassed and ostracized by her friends if she refused.

"Decisions about religion should be left in the hands of families and faith communities, not public school officials," said Edmund Schmidt, an ACLU cooperating attorney. "The vital constitutional principle of religious liberty is best protected when the government stays out of religion. Students and their families cannot feel comfortable expressing their religious beliefs when their teachers and administrators are imposing their own particular religious beliefs."

In a legally binding agreement Dec. 4, school officials pledged to "immediately and forever cease promoting, endorsing and acquiescing in the distribution of Bibles to students of Wilson County schools on school grounds during school hours."

— *Bob Allen, Associated Baptist Press*

Religious Liberty Council Luncheon set for June 25

The 20th annual Religious Liberty Council luncheon will be June 25 in Charlotte, N.C., during the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship General Assembly. This year's speaker is Dr. William D. Underwood, the president of Mercer University in Macon, Ga. Underwood is a strong voice for religious liberty on the Mercer campus and in the community, and he is also a former BJC intern.



Underwood

Watch for details about tickets, time and exact location in upcoming editions of *Report from the Capital* so you can plan to attend this annual event!