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REPORT from the Capital

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**Aidsand Wright-Riggins to address Religious Liberty Council luncheon at CBF General Assembly in Memphis, Tenn.**



The Rev. Dr. Aidsand Wright-Riggins is executive director of National Ministries, American Baptist Churches USA.

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# REPORT

from the Capital

## Iraq status reportedly divides panel on religious freedom

WASHINGTON — An independent, nonpartisan federal panel's failure to issue a recommendation to the State Department about Iraq is reportedly due to political division.

The United States Commission on International Religious Freedom released its annual report and recommendations May 2. But conspicuously absent from the document was a recommendation on whether to blacklist Iraq.

"The commissioners said at the press conference several times that they haven't finished their deliberations on Iraq and they will be traveling back to the region later this month to collect more information so they can make a considered decision," Judith Ingram, the panel's spokesperson, said May 8.

The report and recommendations — made to Congress, President Bush and Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice — included information about religious freedom conditions in dozens of countries around the world. Although it did not contain information about Iraq or a recommendation, the commissioners sent a separate letter to Rice mentioning their concern about that country.

"We remain seriously concerned about religious freedom conditions in Iraq," the commissioners wrote.

The 1998 law that created USCIRF requires it to report annually on the status of religious liberty worldwide and to recommend that the State Department name nations that commit or tolerate "severe and egregious" violations of religious freedom as "Countries of Particular Concern," or CPCs. Administration officials retain ultimate authority to make those designations and impose sanctions they deem appropriate.

In addition, the commission has made a practice of producing a "watch list" of nations in danger of earning CPC status. Last year, it added Iraq to the watch list. In 2006, the panel added Afghanistan. In 2007, the panel was divided — mostly along party lines — on whether to elevate Iraq to the watch list or to full CPC status.

But the *New York Sun* reported May 1 that the division was even sharper and more partisan this year.

The 10-member panel has nine voting members. Of those presently serving, five commissioners were appointed by Republicans and four by Democrats. According to the *Sun*, all Democrat-appointed commissioners supported elevating Iraq to CPC status this year, while most Republican-appointed commissioners opposed the designation and the report accompanying it.

A draft of the Iraq recommendation reportedly was harshly critical of the Bush administration's military strategy in Iraq because of its lack of provisions for protecting religious minorities. Some Republican commissioners planned to issue a dissenting report accusing the panel's Democrats of injecting partisanship into the process.

The commission's members and staff almost always make recommendations by consensus and decline to speak publicly about ideological divisions on the panel. Ingram would only say that commissioners will make a recommendation following the trip to the region later in May.

Other than Iraq, the panel's recommendations for CPC status and its watch list are unchanged from last year. Commissioners recommended the State Department designate Burma, China, Eritrea, Iran, North Korea, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Vietnam as CPCs.

Although the commission has long recommended most of those nations for CPC status, the State Department has not followed that recommendation for Pakistan and Turkmenistan, has been slow to take action against Saudi Arabia and, last year, removed Vietnam from its CPC list.

The commission's report criticized those decisions, noting that religious freedom violations are widespread in Pakistan and Turkmenistan. The commission also contended that Vietnam has not improved conditions enough to warrant its removal from the CPC list, which happened on the eve of Bush's November 2006 trip there.

With the exception of Iraq, the panel's watch list is the same as the last two years: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Belarus, Cuba, Egypt, Indonesia and Nigeria.



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# Evangelicals lament a politicized faith

WASHINGTON — Evangelical Christians should be defined by their theology — and not their politics — to avoid becoming “useful idiots” of a political party, a group of leaders said May 7 in a statement.

The document, “An Evangelical Manifesto,” reflects the frustration of some within a movement that claims about one in four Americans over how they are perceived by others and who can speak for them.

The 19-page document declares that evangelicals err when they try to politicize faith and use Christian beliefs for political purposes.

“That way faith loses its independence, the church becomes ‘the regime at prayer,’ Christians become ‘useful idiots’ for one political party or another, and the Christian faith becomes an ideology in its purest form,” the document reads.

The statement, however, resisted calls to privatize or personalize the faith, saying there is an important place for evangelical voices in the public square.

“Called to an allegiance higher than party, ideology and nationality, we Evangelicals see it our duty to engage with politics, but our equal duty never to be completely equated with any party, partisan ideology, economic system, or nationality,” the document says.

The manifesto, which at times upbraids evangelicals for contributing to their own image problems, comes about six months after a poll showed that many young people grade Christianity as being judgmental and hypocritical. Drafters of the document said they knew other evangelicals who were “ashamed” or “reluctant” to describe themselves as evangelical.

A nine-member steering committee spent three years working on the manifesto. The document’s initial 75 signatories are evangelical leaders from major coalitions, educational institutions and denominations. They include National Association of Evangelicals President Leith Anderson, best-selling author and megachurch pastor Max Lucado, and the Rev. Jack Hayford, president of the International Church of the Foursquare Gospel.

Critics claim some key names — including conservative evangelical leaders such as Focus on the Family founder James Dobson and Southern Baptist public policy executive Richard Land — are missing from the statement.

“The select group drafting the manifesto apparently excludes traditional conservative, pro-life and pro-family evangelical voices,” said Janice Shaw Crouse of Concerned Women for America, who also questioned the timing of the document’s release at the end of the primary election season.

The Rev. John Huffman, pastor of St. Andrew’s Presbyterian Church in Newport Beach, Calif., said the

statement’s steering committee had conversations with Dobson, though his board recommended he not sign it. Dobson spokesman Gary Schneeberger confirmed this and said the board’s reasoning was a private matter.

“Our umbrella is large,” said Huffman. “Not all will sign it, but we do feel we do need to bring our particular perspective.”

Land, the president of the Southern Baptist Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission, said he had not seen the statement before it was released.

“People have a right to invite who they want to to their party,” Land said, but he added that the question about religious involvement in politics is a

“false dichotomy.”

“It’s not an either/or,” he said. “It’s both.”

David Neff, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* magazine and a member of the steering committee, said the media’s equating “value voters” with evangelicals have contributed to the confusion about who evangelicals are.

“If there’s an election that this is about, it’s the election of 2000, not the election of 2008,” said Neff.

The document is intended to explain evangelicals to those outside their fold, as well as to challenge evangelicals to better represent their faith.

“... We are troubled by the fact that the confusions and corruptions surrounding the term ‘Evangelical’ have grown so deep that the character of what it means has been obscured and its importance lost,” the manifesto reads. “Many people outside the movement now doubt that ‘Evangelical’ is ever positive, and many inside now wonder whether the term any longer serves a useful purpose.”

The statement calls for a reaffirmation of evangelical identity — including the importance of sharing the belief that Jesus is the only Savior of mankind. It expresses concern that “a generation of culture warring” has created a backlash against religion in public life.

It also called for an openness to work with people of good will, including those of other faiths or no faith. The document also calls for reform of behavior within evangelical ranks.

“All too often we have set out high, clear statements of the authority of the Bible,” it reads, “but flouted them with lives and lifestyles that are shaped more by our own sinful preferences and by modern fashions and convenience.”

Others among the 75 initial signatories are Nueva Esperanza USA President Luis Cortes; Wheaton College President Duane Litfin; Samuel Rodriguez, president of the National Hispanic Christian Leadership Conference; Jim Wallis, founder and editor of *Sojourners* magazine; and Frank Wright, president of the National Religious Broadcasters.

— RNS



# REFLECTIONS

## Religious liberty is an international issue

In April, I had the pleasure of speaking at an international religious liberty conference in beautiful Buenos Aires sponsored by the Argentine Council for Religious Liberty (“CALIR”) and hosted by the Catholic University of Argentina. Here’s a quick report of the highlights.

It was a significant occasion. For the first time ever in an overwhelmingly Catholic country, a Baptist — Raul Scialabba — was elected president of CALIR. This was quite an accomplishment and a tribute to Dr. Scialabba in a country where Baptists comprise less than one percent of the population.

The conference was attended mostly by Argentine students, professors, pastors, political leaders and legislative staffers. On my plenary panel, charged with addressing the ambitious topic of “The Challenges of Religious Liberty,” were Dr. Silvio Ferrari from Milan and Dr. Isidoro Martin-Sanchez from Madrid.

I spoke about the challenges in the United States in particular. In a nutshell, I described two overarching challenges: first, the need to take seriously both religion clauses in the First Amendment and how to deal with the tension between them, and, second, the importance of affirming the relevance of religion to politics without disparaging the spirit of the no religious test clause in Article VI of the Constitution. (To read my full text, visit [www.BJConline.org](http://www.BJConline.org)).

I was struck by two things while participating in the conference.

First, I was amazed at how much Argentines and those from other countries know about church-state relations in our country — certainly a lot more than most in the U.S. know about the state of religious liberty throughout the rest of the world. Generally speaking, our friends from other countries understand — even if they do not fully embrace — the United States’ commitment to the principles of no establishment and free exercise. In Argentina, for example, the Catholic Church is clearly privileged in almost every way, including the use of public monies, while other Christians and religious traditions simply enjoy tax exemption if they register with the government. But most foreign observers are savvy enough to understand that the United States’ version of church-state separation is of a more friendly variety than that found in other parts of the world such as France, where the separation principle takes on a more hostile tone. They also are incredibly interested in and up-to-date on the presidential election primaries and the extent to which religious issues pervade the public debate. During the Q&A session, I was asked about the present influence of the religious right in American politics and Sen. Barack Obama’s views on religious liberty and church and state. The participants tend-

ed to be intrigued by how openly religion is discussed in the public square and in the campaign in a country so committed to the separation of church and state.

I was also struck by how it feels to be a member of a minority religious tradition (in the context of the overall Argentine society) and how little most of the rest of the world knows about Baptists. Baptists, taken together, are the largest Protestant denomination in the U.S. In much of our country, Baptists are in the overwhelming majority and dominate the culture. Not so elsewhere around the world. As mentioned, less than one percent in Argentina are Baptist. They are also perplexed by how Jimmy Carter and Pat Robertson, for example, and millions in between can call themselves Baptists and surprised to learn about Baptists’ historic commitment to church-state separation.

Dr. Scialabba invited four Baptists to speak. In addition to myself, these included Denton Lotz, General Secretary Emeritus of the Baptist World Alliance, Gustavo Grancharoff, an Argentine lawyer and activist, and Arnoldo Canclini, a longtime Baptist leader in Argentina. I think we all gave the attendees a good dose of Baptist history and heritage and explained why believers called Baptists are so committed to church-state separation.

The message that we Baptist speakers delivered to that august assembly can be summarized by Denton Lotz’s “Ten Theses to Promote Religious Liberty,” boiled down to five:

1. Religious liberty is the ground of all freedom. Where religious freedom is denied, all other freedoms are threatened.
2. Separation of church and state strengthens religious freedom for all.
3. Religion must be free to be prophetic. When church and state merge, that prophetic critique of the state is compromised.
4. The state has the right to restrict religious practice only under limited circumstances, such as where it must prevent harm to innocent third parties.
5. Religious freedom must include the right to change one’s religion and the right to share one’s faith.

These are valuable truths for all of us to hear and keep in mind — for Baptists as much as others.

Oh, by the way, the steaks are delicious, the hospitality gracious and the peso cheap. All good reasons for you to visit Buenos Aires, too!



J. Brent Walker  
Executive Director



Pictured at the conference in Argentina are, from left to right, Raul Scialabba, Brent Walker and Denton Lotz.

# Lawyer group recruiting churches

A legal advocacy group founded by religious right broadcasters is recruiting pastors for an act of civil disobedience by preaching about political candidates in violation of rules against politicking for nonprofit charities imposed by the Internal Revenue Service.

The Alliance Defense Fund, based in Scottsdale, Ariz., hopes its Sept. 28 "Pulpit Initiative" will prompt a legal battle allowing the Christian lawyer group to argue in court that the ban violates the First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution.

"Through strategic lawsuits against the Internal Revenue Service (IRS), ADF seeks to restore the right of each pastor to speak Scriptural truth from the pulpit about moral, social, governmental, and other issues without fear of losing his church's tax exempt status," says an FAQ about the initiative on the ADF Web site.

"Pastors have a right to speak about biblical values from the pulpit without fear of punishment," ADF Senior Legal Counsel Erik Stanley said in a press release. "No one should be able to use the government to intimidate pastors into giving up their constitutional rights."

By law, organizations exempt from paying taxes under IRS Code section 501(c)(3) may not "participate in, or intervene in (including the publishing or distributing of statements), any political campaign on behalf of (or in opposition to) any candidate for public office."

An organization founded in 1994 by 30 Christian right leaders including Bill Bright of Campus Crusade for Christ, James Dobson of Focus on the Family, D. James Kennedy of Coral Ridge Ministries and Don Wildmon of the American Family Association, the ADF considers itself the conservative answer to the American Civil Liberties Union.

The ADF says groups like Americans United for Separation of Church and State have used the ban on pulpit electioneering, added to the law in 1954 at the initiative of then-Senator Lyndon

Johnson, to "create an atmosphere of intimidation and fear for any church that dares to speak Scriptural truth about candidates for office."

"It is time for the intimidation and threats to end," says the Pulpit Initiative letter of intent. "Churches and pastors have a constitutional right to speak freely and truthfully from the pulpit, even on candidates and voting, without fearing loss of their tax exemption."

Barry Lynn of Americans United called the effort "a truly deplorable scheme."

"Federal tax law rightly requires churches and other tax-exempt groups to use their resources for religious and charitable purposes, not partisan politics," he said. "When the faithful put their hard-earned dollars in the collection plate, they don't expect it to wind up pushing some politician's campaign."

The ADF claims the electioneering ban violates the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment, because it requires the government to excessively monitor religious institutions; the Free Exercise Clause, because it substantially burdens a church's exercise of religion; and the Free Speech Clause, because it puts conditions on tax exemption based solely on the content of speech.

Baptist leaders contacted by EthicsDaily.com, however, said the restrictions exist for good reason.

"Preachers who want to turn their churches into political action committees need to play by the same rules as all the other political action committees in our country," said Bruce Prescott of Mainstream Oklahoma Baptists. "They need to give up their tax-exempt status. They should not expect American taxpayers to subsidize their political activities. Nobody gets a tax deduction when they make contributions to other political organizations."

"It is always interesting that politics seems to find a way to trump principle in an election year," said Larry McSwain, professor of ethics and leadership at McAfee School of Theology in

# Churches to disobey tax law



Atlanta.

"There is absolutely nothing wrong with the pastor who wants to use the pulpit to help elect a favorite candidate as an exercise in free speech, which is the argument of the Alliance Defense Fund, but not under the cover of tax exemption," McSwain said. "Churches who want to elect politicians should NOT register as tax-exempt houses of worship. The IRS rules are fair and nothing is more unfair than to scream for separation with one voice while asking for the benefits of government support with another. Church members should give their money freely and without tax exemption if they want their pastor to be a partisan political voice."

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty, told The Associated Press that churches should be involved in public issues, but partisan activity can "compromise the essential calling to

spread the gospel."

"The church can't raise a prophetic fist at a candidate or at a party when it's locked up in a tight bear hug with that candidate or party," Walker said.

The ADF is offering to assist pastors in preparing sermons carefully crafted to contend the IRS ban violates the constitution. If the IRS investigates them, they can sue the IRS and the ADF will defend them for free.

If a lawsuit is unsuccessful, the group admits, the IRS could levy an excise tax on the church or revoke its tax-exempt status for a period of time. But it says that losing tax exemption temporarily would likely have "very little impact" on a church's ability to raise money.

— Bob Allen, EthicsDaily.com

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**K. Hollyn Hollman**  
General Counsel

## Evangelicals express lessons learned and hope for future

This election season has been filled with religion stories. Many have centered on the political activities of churches and the strategic use of religion by candidates. From a different angle comes a story about Christians, many who call themselves conservatives, re-evaluating their involvement in politics and in society more broadly. In “An Evangelical Manifesto: A Declaration of Evangelical Identity and Public Commitment,” these religious leaders, seminary professors, authors and other self-identified “evangelicals” try to clarify who they are and what they believe.

Although it lacks detailed commitments to act on specific issues, the statement is a welcome contribution to the ongoing public conversation about religion and politics and issues a strong warning against the politicization of faith. It is also a fresh proclamation that Christians should be faithful to freedom, which is a central part of the good news that they claim. From my perspective, the broader consensus reached on those concerns, the better.

Historic Baptists (and their partners) who take seriously the legacy of defending church-state separation are accustomed to explaining our “Baptist” identity. As a non-hierarchical tradition, we are naturally diverse. We can relate to the need to put distance between ourselves and prominent voices that share our name but undermine our distinctive principles. Though most Baptists would be more inclined to respond with a rededication to first principles and explore new models of cooperation, as with the New Baptist Covenant movement, a “manifesto” may have its place.

The “Evangelical Manifesto” authors go to great lengths to define themselves and to disclaim the idea that “evangelical” is synonymous with a religious person closely aligned with conservative party politics. The desire is understandable, though the lengthy definition section — seven foundations, with seven implications, the sixth implication of which has five explanations — may give pause to the average evangelical in the pew eager to return to a focus on the “good news of Jesus.” Fortunately, the statement then moves beyond self-serving. In fact, it is self-critical, calling for reform and rethinking about the place of evangelicals in public life. For policy advocates who wear their religion on their sleeves, it is an

admirable call for humility.

Though they mention briefly the issues that have dominated the public perception of evangelicals — opposition to gay marriage and abortion — they repeatedly emphasize a broader agenda and a desire to work respectfully with others. Unfortunately, as they reassess their role in public life, they fail to define terms in a way that would make their commitment more clear.

The authors decry a “sacred public square” that gives a preference to the religious majority and they affirm the right for expression for all. They disclaim an effort to coerce religious belief. That’s all good and sounds unequivocally right to my ears. These statements seem to be rejecting government action that would prefer one religious tradition over the other, violating what the Supreme Court has called “the clearest command of the Establishment Clause.” Preference for the majority religion and coercion are things we worry about when the government speaks for religion.

Next, however, the authors decry as even worse, those that would “keep the public square inviolably secular.” But here they seem to be using “public” to mean beyond one’s home or house of worship. They worry about a threat of “a naked public square.” This hostile environment where people are unjustly invited into the public square “stripped of the faith that makes them who they are” does not sound like any governmental initiative. Did they intend to claim the government poses this threat, or was it a careless slip into familiar rhetoric? Of course, whether the word “public” is used to mean government-sponsored has significant social and legal implications.

Fortunately, however, the proposed response is an application of the golden rule, applying a civil working respect for the rights of all, and a commitment to follow the ways of Jesus. They “deplore the dangerous alliance between church and state,” tracing their heritage “not to Constantine, but to the very different stance of Jesus of Nazareth.” They are quick to note that this does not mean watering down beliefs, but respecting differences based on conscience and debating with respect.

As a statement of principles that affirms the rights of others and invites conversation, this effort seems to be on a hopeful course. It has ignited lively discussion in the news and blogosphere. I join those who commend the statement and look forward to seeing it lived out in ways that benefit religious freedom.

“For policy advocates who wear their religion on their sleeves, it is an admirable call for humility.”

## Former Intern Spotlight

### Underwood serves as university president

A spring 1981 Baptist Joint Committee intern, William D.

Underwood was selected to serve as the 18th president of Mercer University beginning July 1, 2006.

Prior to joining Mercer, Underwood served at Baylor University as interim president and held the prestigious Leon Jaworski Chair at the Baylor School of Law, having joined the law faculty in 1990 after practicing law with a large firm in Dallas. During the 1997-98 school year, he served as Baylor's General Counsel.



Underwood

Underwood was designated a Master Teacher at Baylor in recognition of extraordinary classroom teaching and was named an Outstanding University Professor in 2005. He is an elected member of the American Law Institute and the American Bar Foundation. He has published extensively on a range of topics and has presented a number of papers on how faith relates to higher education, especially at universities that share the historical and theological commitment of Baptists to intellectual and religious freedom and respect for religious diversity.

Underwood is a *summa cum laude* graduate of the University of Illinois College of Law, which awarded him the Juris Doctor degree. He graduated as class salutatorian and was an editor of the University of Illinois Law Review. Following graduation, he clerked for the Honorable Sam D. Johnson of the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals. He also holds a degree from Oklahoma Baptist University, where he met his spouse, Lesli. They have two teenage children, Jessica and William.

*Are you a former BJC intern? Tell us what you've been up to since leaving the BJC. Include personal information, as well as your academic background. Please send us an e-mail and a picture to Phallan Davis at [pdavis@BJCOnline.org](mailto:pdavis@BJCOnline.org).*

### President Bush urges steps to save urban religious schools

WASHINGTON — President Bush called for more proactive measures to help urban religious schools — including expanding voucher programs — and invoked the spirit of Pope Benedict XVI in a speech April 24 at a summit on faith-based schools in inner cities.

"America's inner-city faith-based schools are closing at an alarming rate," Bush said.

"Helping inner-city children receive the education they deserve is so important as we head into the 21st century."

The president said close to 1,200 faith-based schools closed in U.S. inner cities between 2000 and 2006, affecting about 400,000 students. While defending his

work with public schools through his "No Child Left Behind" initiative, Bush said parents should have options when their public schools are not meeting proper standards.

According to recent data from the National Catholic Educational Association, about 29 percent of students in Catholic schools come from racial or ethnic minorities, up from 11 percent in 1970. About 14 percent of students in Catholic schools are non-Catholics.

Bush suggested that there should be greater efforts to overturn so-called "Blaine Amendments," which prohibit public money for religious schools and currently exist in more than 30 state constitutions.

"These amendments have their roots in 19th century anti-Catholic bigotry and today continue to harm low-income students of many faiths and many backgrounds," he said.

Bush also said he would continue seeking congressional expansion of the D.C. Choice Incentive Act, a pilot voucher program that permits funding of students in religious and nonreligious private schools in Washington, D.C.

— RNS

*Note: The Baptist Joint Committee acknowledges that the Blaine Amendments may have, in part, been fueled by anti-Catholic bigotry. This history, however, does not negate the fact that now state constitutional provisions are applied broadly to all religious institutions and do not discriminate based upon a particular religious denomination.*

### La. American Civil Liberties Union awarded damages over Jesus portrait

SLIDELL, La. — A federal judge on April 16 agreed with the American Civil Liberties Union of Louisiana that a decision by Slidell officials to hang a portrait of Jesus on the wall at Slidell City Court was unlawful. The judge awarded the ACLU nominal damages as well as attorneys fees for its role in a lawsuit filed last summer.

The ruling by U.S. District Court Judge Ivan L.R. Lemelle provides the ACLU with \$1 in damages and paves the way for the ACLU to collect the fees it incurred when it sued the court, Judge Jim Lamz, the city of Slidell and St. Tammany Parish.

Marjorie Esman, the ACLU of Louisiana's executive director, hailed the judge's decision as a victory for all people, who she said the legal system is designed to protect. However, she said she would have preferred to settle the matter amicably and in a way that would not have forced Slidell taxpayers to foot the cost.

Lemelle said at the time that he likely would have granted a request by the ACLU to remove the portrait, as it clearly demonstrated a religious purpose and intent, which violates the First Amendment.

But Lemelle said he chose to allow the portrait to stay after officials expanded the display. Lemelle added that court officials had corrected their initial mistake.

— RNS