



Gaddy warns Mainstream Baptists to be vigilant on religious liberty

By Robert Marus

Published: March 2, 2006

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Speaking Feb. 24 in the birthplace of the First Amendment's religion clauses, a Baptist minister who is a professional opponent of the Religious Right warned Baptists to be equally vigilant.

Welton Gaddy, president of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance and preaching pastor at Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La., told about 100 people gathered for a Mainstream Baptist Network meeting that he is looking for some "real Baptists" to stand up for religious liberty.

"In recent years, the joy I find in the work that I do has been tempered significantly by a growing sense that something is wrong -- something is bad wrong in this nation," Gaddy said, speaking in Richmond, Va. "Politicians have latched on to religion as a key ingredient in their strategies to win elections, to pass controversial pieces of legislation, and to garner support for questionable public policies. Reciprocally, religious leaders have formed alliances with more-than-willing politicians in an effort to use the government -- its agencies, laws, policies and money -- to seek preferential treatment for their particular religious institutions and the advancement of narrow sectarian agendas."

Gaddy cited a litany of examples of what he considers threats to religious freedom and church-state separation. They included government money being given directly to churches for social services; increasingly polarizing religious rhetoric in political campaigns; government agencies spying on American Muslims, Quakers and other religious groups because they espouse beliefs that differ from the executive branch; and a sitting Supreme Court justice who has stated he doesn't believe the First Amendment's religion clauses apply to the states.

Baptists hold the key to overcoming such perils, Gaddy said.

"Every day I work with people who come from over 75 different religious traditions," he said. "With respect for all of them and intending no diminution in the importance of any of them, I believe that real Baptists can make a major contribution for good in the midst of a bad situation. Religious freedom is our tradition; religious freedom should be our vision and passion."

Gaddy's speech came during the Mainstream Network's fifth annual national convocation. The group was founded in 2001, formally bringing together a coalition of moderate groups dedicated to preventing fundamentalists from taking over the leadership of several state Baptist conventions.

Only a handful of state conventions are still controlled by moderates, and several of the state Mainstream groups have ceased to function.

David Currie, the network's Texas-based coordinator, acknowledged to network supporters that there may be some confusion over the group's reason for existence.

"You may be asking, 'Why do we still have the Mainstream Baptist Network? The fight is pretty much over in all the states,'" he said.

But Currie said the group still has a role in Baptist and broader American life, and a major part of

that role is telling the Baptist story about religious freedom. "Conservatives should support religious liberty more than anyone," he said.

Currie said Christians should encourage religious freedom and the separation of church and state because too cozy a relationship between the two harms both church and state. He particularly criticized elements in the Religious Right who claim Christians in the United States are being persecuted because government won't endorse their views.

"They have invited persecution because of their overreaching into the lives of people and the religious expression of people who are protected by the First Amendment. If Christians are being persecuted in this country, in my opinion, it's because they've asked for it," he said. "We will experience much less persecution, if it exists, when we return to preaching the love of God -- that is all that has ever won people to the love of Christ."

He also said the group retains an educational role in Baptist life, explaining how the Southern Baptist Convention took a rightward turn since fundamentalists began to gain control of it in 1979.

"We are still, basically, the only group that publicly challenges fundamentalism -- and that's an important thing to do," he said. "Now others may challenge a specific issue ... but we're still the only folks who are still trying to educate Baptists about what's happened the last 26-27 years."

Currie also said the network could continue to "stir the pot" and encourage separate groups of "free Baptists" -- such as the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, the American Baptist Churches-USA, the Baptist World Alliance and the moderate-led Virginia and Texas state conventions -- to work together.

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