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Baptist leader says NC crucial in marriage debate

By Tom Breen
WAKE FOREST (AP) - North Carolina, the last state in the South without a constitutional amendment banning same-sex

marriage, can play a key role in the national debate over the topic, a prominent Southern Baptist leader told an audience in Wake Forest on March 28.

Richard Land, president of the convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, is often the point man on policy issues for the nation's largest Protestant denomination, and his presence in North Carolina signals how closely the May 8 referendum vote here is being watched around the country.

"Make no mistake, those (Supreme Court) justices are watching what the people of North Carolina say about this issue," Land told an audience at the Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Land said he believes the U.S. Supreme Court would be hesitant to allow couples of the same gender to marry if other states join the 29 already with amendments defining marriage as between a man and a woman. That could change if states like North Carolina reject such amendments, he said.

"If we lose, they will exercise their judicial imperialism," he said. "That's what's at stake."

While North Carolina law already prohibits same-sex marriage, supporters of the amendment contend the statute is still vulnerable to court challenges. Amendment backers are hoping churches will provide the backbone of their support for the vote, and the event in Wake Forest included pastors and theologians who underscored that point.

DVDs made by the Family Research Council were distributed in the pews of Binkley Chapel, where the event was held, containing sermons, videos and church bulletin inserts for pastors looking to energize their flocks on the issue.

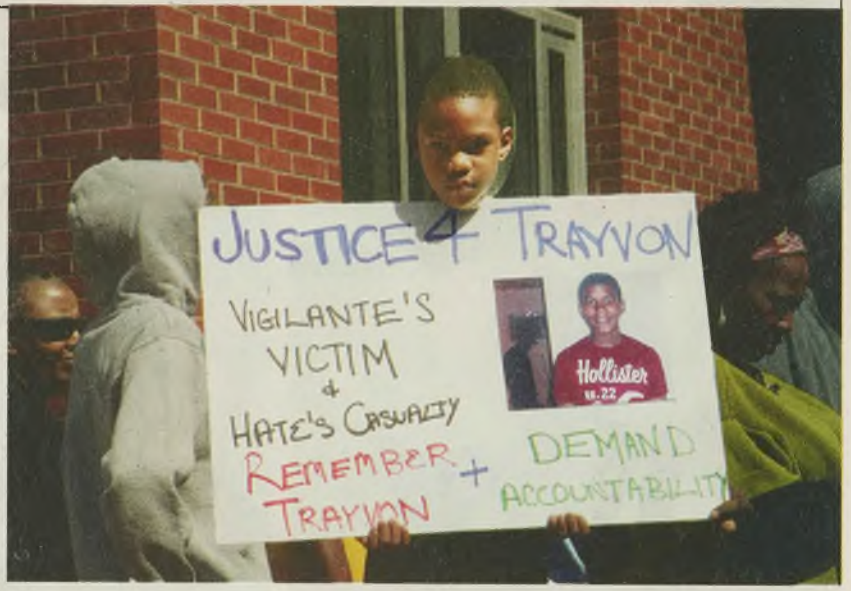
"North Carolina is not really the first state to move to protect marriage," said Kenyn Cureton, vice president for church ministries at the research council. "In fact, North Carolina is the only Southern state not to, so don't let us down, guys."

While the state's largest Christian denominations, including the state Southern Baptist convention, support the amendment, North Carolina's Christians are not unanimous on the issue. Some clergy members from churches outside those denominations argue that Christians have a duty to oppose the amendment as discriminatory.

"The biblical story is about God's covenant with God's people and how that covenant is shaped in ways that are just and loving and inclusive and that embody grace and forgiveness," said the Rev. Nancy Petty, pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh. "That's how I understand and read the Bible."

Recently, about 30 members of a group called Clergy for Equality preached against the marriage amendment. The Rev. Chris Ayers, pastor of Wedgewood Baptist Church in Charlotte, said Christians should interpret the Bible through the example of Jesus, which Ayers said means recognizing the love same-sex partners have for each other.

"In the eyes of God, gay couples are married, and they're refusing to seem as if they're not married in the eyes of this state or any other state," he said.



One of the youngest rally participants at NCCU holds a sign demanding justice for Trayvon Martin. (NCCU Photo by Lawson)



NCCU rally participants sit and lay on the ground as a symbolic gesture of the killing of Trayvon Martin. (NCCU Photo by Lawson)

NC death penalty study author meets House members

By Gary D. Robertson

RALEIGH (AP) - A House committee examining whether to make changes to the Racial Justice Act heard March 27 from the co-author of a study that found race was a significant factor as prosecutors made juror decisions in death penalty cases. The report was met by skepticism and support from panel members.

Michigan State University law professor Barbara O'Brien addressed the committee as lawmakers decide what, if anything, to do about a 2009 law designed to reduce death sentences to life imprisonment when racial bias is evident.

O'Brien told the committee her review of more than 7,400 potential capital jurors couldn't locate anything other than race to explain why potential black jurors were rejected more than twice as often by prosecutors compared to whites.

The statistical analysis of qualified jurors for the cases of all 173 death row prisoners as of July 2010 found prosecutors statewide were on average 2.26 times more likely to dismiss a potential black juror compared to any other qualified member of the jury pool. The pool doesn't include people who wouldn't support a death sentence under any circumstance.

The black-white strike ratio of at least 2-to-1 held even when O'Brien's analysis controlled for other variables that could have had an effect on a prosecutor's decision-making, such as information scrubbed from juror questionnaires and court transcripts for about 25 percent of the qualified jurors. The variables for example, included whether the prospective juror knew a witness or the defendant; stood accused of a crime; or expressed reservations about the death penalty.

"Racial disparities that we observed in the raw strike a pattern ... they're not explained by any race neutral characteristics that we could find and that ever have been suggested to us," O'Brien said, adding that there were no factors in the court records or in affidavits by prosecutors that could explain the different ways these black potential jurors were being treated.

Republican leaders in the House formed the committee when they couldn't gather enough votes in January to override Democratic Gov. Beverly Perdue's veto of a bill that would have effectively repealed the 2009 law, which was passed when Democrats were in control. The committee is expected to make recommendations to the full General Assembly when it reconvenes in May.

O'Brien testified earlier this year about the study at the first hearing for a death-row prisoner using the Racial Justice Act. A judge has yet to rule in the case of Marcus Robinson of Cumberland County, whose lawyers argue race was a factor in the decisions of prosecutors to reject potential jurors who were black. The judge would sentence Robinson to life in prison if he finds race was a significant factor in Robinson's sentence.

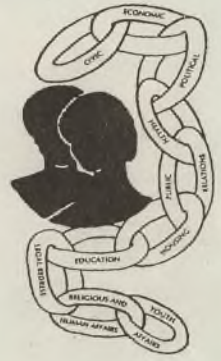
The study scrutinized decision-making by prosecutors in striking potential jurors from the pool, not the attorneys for the defendant. O'Brien told Rep. Sarah Stevens, R-Surry, the percentage of black jurors actually empaneled for the death penalty cases reviewed was on par with the 16 percent in the number of qualified jurors.

Jonathan Perry, an assistant district attorney in Union County who cross-examined O'Brien in the Cumberland County hearing, also pointed out the study didn't look at cases where death-row inmates already have been executed or the capital defendant was acquitted or received a lesser sentence. That means the study doesn't have a random sample, which is needed to make strong inferences from the data, he said.

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Dr. Lavonia Allison



Retirement Celebration for Dr. E. Lavonia Allison

The Scholarship and Retirement Committee of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People will hold a retirement celebration honoring Dr. Lavonia I. Allison, "A Phenomenal Woman for All Times" on Saturday, April 14. The event will be held at the Radisson Hotel Research Triangle Park at 6 p.m. The honoree has worked unselfishly for Durham, the State of North Carolina, and the nation improving the well-being of our citizens for over forty years. For fourteen years she served as the Chairperson of the Durham Committee on the Affairs of Black People. During these years she made significant inroads that broadened the scope of the Committee through its nine standing committees to increase its effectiveness in the areas of Health, Education, Economics, Housing and Political Action.

Tributes will be provided on behalf of the Allison family, the State of North Carolina, City of Durham, North Carolina Mutual Life Insurance Company, Representative Larry Hall, U.S. Congressman G.K. Butterfield, Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Inc. and others.

The cost to attend the event is \$50 and tables are available for \$500. A portion of the proceeds for attendance will be donated to the Scholarship Fund. Donations to the fund can also be made in lieu of attendance. All funds must be mailed prior to the event date as no funds will be accepted at the door.

Contact Mignon Schooler at 919-493-3885 for questions about attendance. Mail your contribution to:
Mignon Schooler
P.O. Box 52605
Durham, NC 27717

Faison predicting success with NC gov's run

By Gary D. Robertson
GREENVILLE (AP) - Bill Faison played the maverick's role last fall by scrutinizing what he called fellow Democratic Gov. Beverly Perdue's inactivity about high unemployment and spending cuts by the Republican-led Legislature and by promoting his own jobs plan.

The Orange County state House member traveled like a statewide candidate, speaking to Democratic groups and their allies. While the medical malpractice attorney said he wouldn't run for governor unless Perdue stepped aside, he also predicted publicly she would quit the race.

Faison's forecast came true Jan. 26 when Perdue announced she wouldn't seek re-election. He got in the race two days later. He said people are hyping his ability to push Perdue out.

"No one would be able to force someone out of a race like a sitting governor," Faison said in an interview, adding that going around the state to talk about putting people back to work "is something that ought to be above reproach."

The 65-year-old Faison is now keeping to the same format he used as a quasi-candidate, hoping personal interaction with voters will reap electoral rewards. He was willing to spend two hours in Greenville at the end of a long day of campaigning to meet a combined 25 Democrats.

As one of six hopefuls for the Democratic nomination, Faison now has new predictions: That his performance in April televised debates will separate him from his leading rivals, Lt. Gov. Walter Dalton and former U.S. Rep. Bob Etheridge; and that the electorate will gravitate toward him in the May 8 primary and in November against the presumptive Republican nominee.

"With your help, I'll go beat Pat McCrory this fall," Faison told 10 people at the organizational meeting of the Pitt County Young Democrats at a downtown Greenville bistro. "I don't think it'll be a huge beating, but I'll beat him."

Faison doesn't lack confidence or personal wealth. His campaign had more than \$500,000 as of Dec. 31, almost all of it in the form of his personal loans. He's already run a commercial on television. More personal funds likely are needed if he wants to make a TV ad splash in the primary campaign's final weeks.

Faison is keeping the jobs plan he's promoted since September the anchor of his gubernatorial campaign.

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