

Congress eyes religious issues

By Jim Abrams
Associated Press

WASHINGTON — Congress is getting religion this year, led by those seeking to save the nation's soul but resisted by others warning of constitutional perdition.

In recent weeks, the House has passed legislation aimed at muzzling government interference with religious freedom, has voted to let states display the Ten Commandments in public schools, and has set aside federal money so religious groups can help troubled teens.

The House also has urged, unsuccessfully, creation of a national day of prayer and fasting.

Awaiting consideration in the House and Senate are constitutional amendments on voluntary school prayer; proposals to extend school vouchers to parochial schools and "charitable choice" bills that would permit religious groups to participate in all federally funded social service programs.

Many of these issues appear regularly on the congressional agenda. But several factors have combined to place

greater emphasis than usual this session on religious legislation:

—The school shootings in Colorado and elsewhere.

—GOP frustration with court rulings on state-church issues.

—Even President Clinton's affair with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, which Janet Parshall of the conservative Family Research Council said gave the nation "a morals lesson for 14 months."

"What we are seeing now," she said, "is a congressional awakening that our public is made up of people who are a holy and religious people."

"Our nation is sick and hurting," Rep. Helen Chenoweth, R-Idaho, said last month in support of her national prayer day resolution. "If there ever is a time when we need almighty God, it is now."

From the opposite perspective, Barry Lynn of the Americans United for Separation of Church and State said it was "a trend in the wrong direction because Congress shouldn't be meddling with religion. When government touches religion it tends to degrade it and trivialize it."

Last month, Pat Robertson, president of the Christian Coalition, visited Senate GOP leaders and contended that pushing a religious and pro-family agenda would be crucial for a Republican victory in next year's elections.

"In the last election 15 percent of the religious conservatives did not vote because essentially they were turned off by Congress waffling on key issues," Robertson said in an interview with The Associated Press. "This Congress is getting the message and I am very pleased"

Rep. Jerrold Nadler, D-N.Y., a liberal suspicious of attempts to infuse religion in government, cautioned that not all the legislation was the same.

He said measures such as that endorsing the Ten Commandments clearly are unconstitutional. "They are obnoxious and they are done for political reasons," Nadler said.

But he said there are serious if debatable arguments for charitable choice, an idea supported by Vice President Al Gore. As for the bill to stop government interference in religious practices, Nadler said it was "absolutely necessary."

Nadler said he voted against the religious liberty bill, which passed the House by a 306-118 margin, mainly because he wanted language ensuring religion would not be used to justify acts of discrimination.

Charitable choice advocates won a victory when it became a part of the 1996 welfare reform bill, which allows federal funding for religious groups delivering welfare services to the poor. Led by Sen. John Ashcroft, R-Mo., supporters this year hope to open all social service grants to faith-based groups. For Lynn, transfers of tax dollars to ministries raise "extremely serious church-state problems."

Rep. Chet Edwards, D-Texas, during the House debate on applying charitable choice to juvenile crime prevention programs, warned that in five years, Baptists, Jews, Hindus and Muslims all will be arguing "over who got their proportional share of the almighty federal dollar."

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