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## NCC's Edgar knocks Bush stance on Cuba

The general secretary of the National Council of Churches, who worked to reunite Elián González with his Cuban family, said President Bush is wrong to maintain the embargo on Cuba. Bob Edgar spoke to the Washington Office on Latin America at the same time the president was speaking in Miami about his refusal to lift the 40-year-old trade embargo against the communist nation.

"If we really want to invade Cuba with democracy, the best way is to lift the embargo, not impose the embargo," said Edgar, a United Methodist minister and a former six-term Democratic congressman from Pennsylvania. Bush said the island nation "has been insulted by a tyrant who uses brutal methods to enforce a bankrupt vision. [The Cuban] legacy has been debased by a relic from another era who has turned a beautiful island into a prison."

Bush, speaking on May 20 not long after former President Jimmy Carter had visited Cuba and recommended U.S. policy changes, said the embargo would remain in place until President Fidel Castro takes meaningful steps toward reform. Just days after assuming his office in early 2000, Edgar became embroiled in the struggle over Elián, the six-year-old Cuban boy who was found floating off Miami. Edgar and NCC staff worked with the Cuban Council of Churches to return the boy to Cuba, despite some criticism that it was improper for the NCC to become involved in the diplomatic and family dispute.

Edgar said Bush's anti-Castro rhetoric is motivated more by politics than by principle. He said Bush wants to shore up support for his brother, Florida Governor Jeb Bush, while also securing votes for his own 2004 reelection bid. "[The apostle] Paul on the road to Damascus was a persecutor, and when the scales were removed from his eyes, he became a Christian," Edgar said. "In many ways, this president is blind and continues to encourage blindness in others. . . . Hopefully, over time we'll regain our vision."

Edgar said religious freedom is "blossoming" in Cuba and will only be hampered by continuing the sanctions. NCC President Elenie Husagh recently traveled to Cuba to help dedicate land for a new Greek Orthodox cathedral there. "I think God not only wants us to recognize our enemies but recognize our enemies when our enemies are doing the right thing," Edgar said. —RNS

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## Parsonage exemption now legally protected

An IRS policy previously lacking the force of law was swiftly approved by Congress and President Bush, allowing clergy to deduct the fair rental value of housing from their income taxes. Bush signed the bill on May 20 and Justice Department officials indicated that they would seek dismissal of a court case in which the constitutionality of the 80-year-old "parsonage exemption" was being questioned.

According to the Episcopal News Service, the new law spearheaded by Republican Congressman James Ramstad of Minnesota was expected to halt the progress of a court case, *Warren v. Commissioner*, before the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals in San Francisco. The Justice Department will file a motion in that appellate court requesting a dismissal of the case without a decision on the merits. The plaintiff, Rick Warren, founder-pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in California, was expected to join in that motion.

"Clergy are not the only category of taxpayers who are eligible for this kind of benefit; it also applies to military personnel and some college/university personnel who share some of the same housing issues and problems with clergy," said James Wilson, executive director of the Episcopal Church's Clergy Deployment Office. "It helps to even the playing field with respect to some tax issues in which clergy have a disadvantage, such as the requirement that clergy pay self-employment tax for Social Security."

The Church Alliance, an ecumenical coalition of 32 pension boards from Protestant, Catholic and Jewish denominations that promotes legislation

to strengthen church benefit programs, worked with members of Congress and federal agencies to clarify the statute. The legislation amends the IRS code to limit the clergy housing allowance to the fair market rental value of a house.

Advocates for the bill estimated that had the policy been ruled unconstitutional, new costs to clergy and churches could have reached \$500,000 a year, affecting mostly small and rural congregations. They said the clergy housing tax exemption is justified because many clergy are expected to be available at all hours and their homes are frequently used for church functions.

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## House funds center on religion, public life

Not with a large foundation grant but with a federal appropriation, the University of California, Santa Barbara, plans to open this fall the Walter H. Capps Center for Study of Religion and Public Life. A visiting professor each quarter will foster academic programs, internships and community dialogues at the oceanside campus, announced Wade Clark Roof, chairman of the university's religious studies department.

The center, which will also send pairs of students periodically to the multicampus University of California's existing center in downtown Washington, D.C., is being funded primarily through a \$500,000 appropriation from Congress.

"It's Congress's way of remembering their deceased members," said Roof in announcing the center in mid-May. "Walter Capps was on the UCSB faculty for 32 years and served in the House for only ten months before he died in 1997, but he made a big impact while he was there." A tree was also planted on Capitol Hill in memory of Capps, said Roof.

Not to be confused with the Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, with co-chairs in Washington and Chicago, the Capps Center will attempt "to capitalize on its West Coast location," Roof said, to address such issues as "environmental problems, immigrant issues and religious pluralism from a different regional perspective."