

Grass-roots Groups Seek to Put Prayer, Bible Reading in Schools

There are roughly 10,000 student-led Bible clubs in schools, with another 10,000 linked to parachurch organizations

When Congress returned after summer recess, a former California representative increased his efforts to raise public schools' spiritual profile.

William Dannemeyer of Fullerton, who co-founded Americans for Voluntary School Prayer, has been lobbying for a voluntary school prayer amendment since 1995. Though previous attempts have failed, the so-called school prayer amendment was reintroduced in December by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., his third attempt since 1998. If the current bill stalls, Dannemeyer hopes another bill allowing public expressions of faith will pass.

While this drive draws support from such leaders as Charles Colson, James Dobson, John Hagee and Pat Robertson, it has stimulated fierce opposition. The American Civil Liberties Union calls the amendment an "assault on free expression" and insists that the right to pray is already constitutionally protected.

Not all Christians line up behind it, either. Writing for the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, former North Dakota Lt. Gov. Lloyd Omdahl said evangelical Christians should champion separation of church and state. "When the chips are down, we are still a minority in the United States and may well need the protection of the First Amendment down the

road," Omdahl said.

School prayer is just one of the debates raging over religious-political issues. Among others are Ten Commandments displays and anticipated Supreme Court review of a lower court ruling invalidating "under God" in the Pledge of Allegiance.

However, such headlines tend to obscure efforts to restore Christian influence and Bible reading in public schools, which are gaining ground.

Many are low-profile, grass-roots movements—such as the American Family Association-led distribution of "In God We Trust" posters to schools. The higher-profile debates—such as Judge Roy Moore's effort to display the Ten Commandments in front of the Alabama state building—don't affect local groups that much, said David Overstreet, assistant director for field ministries with the National Network of Youth Ministries.

"There will always be a movement not only to limit, but to take away any vestige of our Christian heritage, which has been eroding," Overstreet said.

Despite opposition, today there are an estimated 10,000 student-led Bible clubs in public and private schools. Another 10,000 groups are linked to parachurch ministries such as the Fellowship of Christian Athletes and Youth for Christ.

The founder of First Priority, a Nashville, ministry that promotes citywide cooperatives to form campus Bible clubs, said all Christians should support such initiatives. "When we started 10 years ago, school districts were scared to death," Benny Proffitt said. "Now they're calling us saying, 'Can you

come and help us?'"

The leader of an initiative to get the Bible taught as an elective has seen a similar openness developing this year. Elizabeth Ridenour, president of the National Council on Bible Curriculum in Public Schools, estimates 150,000 teens in 34 states have taken the course since 1993. Nearly 25 percent have enrolled since January.

However, more Christians need to get involved in school issues, according to a former Michigan prosecutor who gained prominence for his stand against assisted-suicide activist Dr. Jack Kevorkian.

Richard Thompson's Thomas Moore Law Center is currently pressing a lawsuit against a northern California district for allegedly promoting the Muslim faith in a seventh-grade history course.

"Had you tried to do that with Christianity there would have been a hue and cry that [schools] were trying to induct students into Christianity," Thompson said. "But there's no hue and cry about this because Christians don't care what is happening."

Dannemeyer said Christians can help turn the political tide. "Congress doesn't lead, it responds to pressure," he said. "Where we come from with voluntary prayer is an acknowledgement that God exists. That's important in our educational system."

Ken Walker