

NEWS - RECORD
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Baptist minister/lawyer says he is more a reporter than a spokesman for his church

By CECILE HOLMES WHITE
Staff Religion Writer

RALEIGH — It doesn't take George Reed long to explain why he's a legislative watchdog for Southern Baptists across North Carolina. "Why am I here? Because somebody's got to be," Reed says.

He is one of 651 lobbyists from organizations ranging from utility companies to day care centers registered with the North Carolina secretary of state's office as people paid by others to give facts and opinions on legislation to members of the General Assembly.

Though a registered lobbyist for the Christian Life Council of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, Reed spends most of his time monitoring, not influencing, the legislature.

Pen in one hand, legal pad in the other, he'll tuck his long legs into a seat in the visitors gallery of the House or Senate and settle back to listen and make notes.

"What I do is more being a news reporter than a lobbyist," Reed says. "I try to keep people informed of what's going on in the legislature and what people's concerns are."

He's also the person to whom some legislators turn when they need support for or against a particular bill. "When I have some things coming up sometimes that I feel like we as a Southern Baptist (state) convention should be concerned about, I'll call George," says Rep. W. Bruce Ethridge, D-Onslow. "He

is a good resource person."

An ordained minister who also holds a law degree from the University of Virginia, Reed believes it would be tough for anyone to represent the views of all of North Carolina's 1.3 million Southern Baptists.

"Baptists are so diverse that to claim to speak for all Baptists, you'd have to speak out both sides of your mouth," he jokes, pushing his wire rim glasses back up onto his nose.

"Our bylaws talk about the Christian Life Council speaking to Baptists, not for them," he says.

Reed knows well that he numbers both arch-conservatives and political freethinkers among the people he represents. So he is a cautious lobbyist. Usually he keeps tabs on legislative priorities, disseminates that information to Baptists and lets them decide which bills they will work to get passed.

When he does lobby in a traditional sense, he often is working against things such as pornography, legalized gambling (including proposals for a statewide lottery) and alcohol-related legislation. All have long been high on Baptists' moral and political agenda.

A savvy fellow with a quiet perspective on his job, Reed nimbly picks the bills he supports from a legislative tree laden with possibilities.

"But I don't know whether my presence makes any direct differ-

(See Reed, E6)



Staff photo by Dave Nicholson

Reed spends a lot of time monitoring the legislature

Reed

From E1

ence," he says. "I think the bulk of the effect of my work is felt through what the folks back home do."

Several years ago Reed worked hard for passage of the Safe Roads Act, legislation that, among other things, stiffened the penalties for driving under the influence of alcohol. Working for passage of the law was in keeping with Baptist tradition, which frowns on consuming alcohol at all, not to mention drinking and driving.

"That was one thing just about all Baptists did agree on. And you could come up here to the legislature and — as long as you made it clear not all Baptists agree on anything — you could speak for them," Reed says. "I spoke to committees a couple of times in public. But I spent more time talking one on one to legislators and calling constituents in our network."

Each individual in that network receives the weekly newsletter Reed sends when the legislature is in session. He has about 1,000 Baptists on his mailing list.

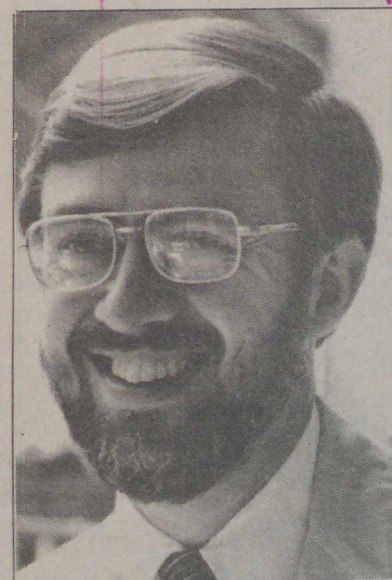
Reed's legislative strategy is to keep them up to date on issues such as efforts to get alcohol ads off television and radio or subsidy funds for families who adopt hard-to-place youngsters. He heads the Christian Citizenship Education program sponsored by the Christian Life Council. In the newsletter, Reed outlines who introduced what bills in which areas and reports the status of bills already introduced.

He also distributes a "General Assembly Guidebook," basically a how-to manual for would-be lobbyists or concerned citizens. The guidebook, based on one developed for use by Southern Baptists in Virginia, covers topics from how to get to know legislators in a particular district to understanding how a proposed bill becomes law.

"On one well-known occasion, Jesus told his listeners regarding their obligations to their government, that they should 'render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's,'" the guidebook notes, referring to

'On one well-known occasion, Jesus told his listeners regarding their obligations to their government, that they should "render unto Caesar the things that are Caesar's." Today our "Caesar" is a democracy which requires that all eligible citizens participate if it is to operate as it should.'

— George Reed



Mark 12:13-17. "Today our 'Caesar' is a democracy which requires that all eligible citizens participate if it is to operate as it should."

Helping Baptists in North Carolina fulfill that obligation is where he comes in, Reed says. He sees some similarities, but has no formal connection to the Christian Action League of North Carolina, a conservative lobbying organization headed by the Rev. Coy Privette of Kannapolis, a state representative from the 34th House District.

"There are some ways in which the kind of work we do is very similar," Reed says. "We both deal with religious constituencies. I deal with just Southern Baptists, and the Christian Action League is an ecumenical organization. Through the newsletters I try to say that there are an awful lot of issues that ought to be of concern to Christians. We try to cover those issues and explain the biblical justification."

But he realizes Baptists often take the material he provides, then lobby on different sides of the same issue.

"The primary way we promote what we do is initially with pastors," Reed says. "And we say to

them, 'If this is something your church is interested in, we would like you or someone in your church to be a contact person.'"

Those contacts — about half of them clergy, half laity — form the cornerstone of Reed's work. The Citizenship Education program he heads began in 1979 when he came to Raleigh from a pastorate in Charlottesville, Va., to work with the Christian Life Council. He knows of only one other Baptist state convention, the Baptist General Convention of Texas, that pays a full-time lobbyist.

Reed did not set out to integrate his theological training with legal work. But when he finished seminary, he decided he needed legal training to work for social change. His work today takes him both to legislative committee halls and to church pulpits.

"My job description talks more about legislative work than anything else," he says. "But what has happened over a period of time is that since the General Assembly is not full-time, I've picked up work on some other things like hunger issues, equal rights, criminal justice and peacemaking."

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LOBBYING FOR THE PEOPLE

Coalition providing voice for seekers of health care

● A new group is to speak up for consumers in the health-care debate.

BY JUSTIN CATANOSO
Staff Writer

Three voices are constant in North Carolina's struggle to devise solutions to the health-care crisis: health-care providers, insurance carriers and employers who provide insurance.

But the voice of health-care consumers, those most affected, is largely missing from the debate.

The N.C. Coalition on Health Care Access, a new citizens lobbying group, hopes to change that.

"It's important for the consumers to be involved just so another voice can be heard," said Pam Silberman, an attorney with N.C. Legal Services who will become the coalition's project director. She is now organizing the coalition, which will be operating by July.

An estimated one-third of all North Carolinians — some 2 million people — have inadequate or no insurance at all.

While the problem strikes the poor the hardest, it is increasingly affecting working and middle-class people as well.

The coalition will be composed of groups representing senior citizens; voluntary health societies; advocates for women, chil-

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

For more information on the N.C. Coalition for Health Care Access, call 1-919-469-5701.

dren, low-income people and minorities; organized labor; church groups; and state employees.

Silberman will gather ideas from these groups and formulate positions. She will then present those to the N.C. Institute of Medicine and a legislative study commission which are developing reform proposals for possible legislation next year.

For example, proposals such as raising insurance deductibles are not in the best interest of consumers, Silberman said. The coalition would argue that to policy makers and suggest alternatives.

The Rev. George Reed lobbies the legislature for the Baptist State Convention on behalf of its 1.2 million members.

Like other groups concerned about health-care reform, Reed said he hopes the coalition will help foster a better understanding of the complex issues involved. "Health care is a high priority legislatively for us," he said.

"But I can't deal with it as a lone ranger. (The coalition) is certainly going to help me in what I need to be doing with Baptists."

The coalition received \$85,000 in start-up funding from the Z. Smith Reynolds and Mary Reynolds Babcock foundations in Winston-Salem.

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Reed To Speak

Dr. George Reed, director of Christian Citizenship and World Hunger for the North Carolina Baptist State Convention, will be the guest speaker for Campbell University's Cultural Enrichment Program at 11 a.m. on Oct. 20. The program will be held in Turner Auditorium, D. Rich Building, on the University campus. The public is invited to attend.

A native of Florida, Reed earned his bachelor of arts degree from Florida State University, his master of divinity degree from Southern Seminary, and his doctor of jurisprudence degree from the University of Virginia Law School.

Before serving as a director for the North Carolina State Baptist Convention, Reed was pastor of Mountain Plain Baptist Church in Mechums River, Virginia.

Reed is married to the former Susan Evans, and they have one son.