

Christian Coalition plans 'Contract' for American families

Religion in schools, abortion eyed

By Larry Witham
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The Christian Coalition, the nation's largest political coalition of religious conservatives, will deliver a "Contract With the American Family" to Congress when it returns from the Easter recess.

"The surveying is in the final stages, and we think we'll have something in a week or two," said coalition Executive Director Ralph Reed in a telephone interview yesterday. "We will present it to Congress when they get back."

In a speech to 150 students at Kennesaw State College in Atlanta on Tuesday night, Mr. Reed outlined seven points that he called "the gist" of what a final document might contain.

That same day House Speaker Newt Gingrich was being feted at a banquet across town.

The Reed speech came after a massive mailing by the Christian Coalition in February and March to solicit priorities for social reform and raise money to pay for a survey of 2 million "Christian voters."

Mr. Reed said that while he has touted the idea of the Contract, he does not expect its agenda to generate another 100-day whirlwind, as the House Republicans' "Contract With America" did.

"But I'd like to see these items taken care of within the 104th Congress," Mr. Reed said. The items outlined in his Atlanta speech were:

- A religious freedom act that would guarantee the right to religious expression in public places, including schools.
- School vouchers and/or tax credits to help parents send their children to private schools.
- A reduction in federal funds to agencies that "undermine moral values," including the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities and the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.
- The defeat of surgeon-general nominee Dr. Henry Foster Jr.
- An end to federal funding for abortion procedures, counseling and referral.
- A possible ban on all third-trimester abortions.

Republican leaders were unavailable for comment yesterday, but high-level aides said Mr. Reed's proposals are consistent with the GOP agenda.

As for passing such legislation in the next 100 days, "members are not interested in deadlines nowadays, because of the pace we went at in the first 100 days," one aide said.

That feeling is so strong that the leadership is refraining from calling the next three months "the

next 100 days," because it implies a deadline, another aide said.

The House's first priority when it returns from recess is passing a bill that would balance the budget by 2002.

Liberal opponents of the social agenda of religious conservatives see the contract idea as an attempt to collect political debts from the Republicans elected with their help last November.

Conservative Christian voters represented up to 30 percent of the turnout in the November election, and 80 percent of white evangelicals voted Republican, according to a study by the Bliss Institute for Applied Politics at the University of Akron.

"What the Christian Coalition has tried to do is be quiet for the first 100 days, and now they are going to call in the chips," said Jill Hanauer, executive director of the Interfaith Alliance, a watchdog group formed last summer to monitor the conservative activists.

"What we're concerned about is that the next 100 days of Congress will be even more divisive because they'll be bringing in this extreme social agenda," said Miss Hanauer, whose board will hold a press conference today on the "moral compass" of the Republican-controlled Congress.

The coalition's March fundraising letter retains the group's symbol of a half circle and star, but "Christian Coalition" around the logo has been replaced by "Contract With the American Family."

"Now we need a second contract with America," coalition founder Pat Robertson says in the letter.

"That's why Christian Coalition will soon be sending Congress our Contract With the American Family," he wrote. "But before I submit the final version of our Contract to Congress, I need to hear from you on what issues you think are most important for us to include."

Gary Bauer, president of the Family Research Council, is among several pro-family leaders who have tried to remind Congress not to forget the social agenda.

But he is not sure if a formal declaration like the Republicans' "Contract With America" is necessary.

"If I had to predict, I would say Ralph may be getting a lot of pressure from the grass roots" to call for social issues, Mr. Bauer said.

"I think the congressional contract idea was an interesting campaign technique," he said. "But most of the things we care about cannot be done in 100 days. They can certainly be started though when Congress gets back May 1."

• This article is based in part on wire service reports.