

Church-state changes loom in new Congress: Three major issues

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As the 109th Congress goes to work this month, legislative battles over religious and moral issues are virtually certain to remain as prominent as they were last year, say two Washington observers of church-state issues.

Holly Hollman of the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Roger Limoges of the Interfaith Alliance say that some church-state bills passed by the House but halted in the Senate last session are more likely to pass now that a handful of conservative Republicans have replaced moderate Democrats in the upper chamber.

Hollman, BJC's general counsel, said she expects "three major issues will be back": another attempt to allow churches to engage in partisan political campaigning while maintaining their tax-exempt status; a series of bills that would strip federal courts of their jurisdiction to rule on various church-state issues; and President Bush's continued efforts to expand the government's ability to fund social work through churches and other religious charities—efforts also known as the "faith-based initiative."

Limoges, the Interfaith Alliance's deputy director for public policy, agreed with Hollman's assessment but also said he expects church-state issues to arise in likely Senate fights over confirming Bush's nominees to federal courts—especially one or more possible vacancies on the Supreme Court. He said his group would be particularly concerned with nominations "that are going to be couched in [terms of] whether someone is a good Catholic or a good person of faith."

Interfaith Alliance leaders think that the Federal Marriage Amendment—a constitutional ban on same-sex marriage, which failed in the last Congress—is almost certain to come up again. Limoges said his group considers the matter a religious-freedom issue.

A bill that has steadily gained support, despite its clash with traditional ideas of congregational neutrality in politics, is likely to be revived by Representative Walter Jones (R., N.C.) and the Religious Right. They pushed the proposed Houses of Worship Political Speech Protection Act in the past two sessions of Congress, including forcing a floor vote in the House that ended in failure.

Hollman noted that some of the bill's chief opponents in the House "are no longer there." Chief among them is retired Representative Amo Houghton (R., N.Y.), who chaired a key subcommittee of the House Ways and Means Committee that dealt with the proposal. His departure "might make the bill more likely to get through the committee process," Hollman said. *-Associated Baptist Press*