

Harry Potter comes under fire

Poor Harry Potter! His books are now the most challenged in our country, according to the American Library Association (to which Women's American ORT belongs). Even though J.K. Rowling's books dominate the best-seller lists and the movie *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone* is still earning millions, they are at the top of the list of most challenged books for the third year in a row. Across the country, religious conservatives are waging a battle to get Harry Potter books out of classrooms, public and school libraries. The ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom has learned of hearings in 27 states, almost all in school libraries, on the grounds of "occult/satanism."

In Alamogordo, N.M., the members of the Christ Community Church held a Harry Potter book burning. The pastor of the church called the books "a masterpiece of satanic deception." Since religious schools are not bound by the First Amendment, it is common for them to ban books. Two Memphis Catholic schools banned the books from their libraries because, "...it is a fundamental rejection of the divine order in creation."

Judith Krug of the ALA says, "These are magical books. They do something many parents and adults had thought wasn't possible anymore: They get kids reading. ...These books explore the classic theme of good versus evil, not satanism." The Supreme Court has held that the First Amendment prohibits schools and libraries from removing books unless the books are "pervasively vulgar" or "obscene." No religious, cultural or political bias may play a part in book choice.

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quORTerly briefing: issues and trends

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No book on the banned list meets any of these standards.

Congress could play a role in protecting Harry and all his friends, since it has the power to cut off funds for equal access, thereby giving books the same right to exist in public schools and libraries.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Plan** a program with a school librarian as a guest and ask about censorship and the school's response to parents' complaints.

■ **Approach** a local school about having a student give a book report on Harry Potter at your chapter meeting. Reward the student with a gift of a book.

■ **Look up** the ALA's site, www.ala.org/bbooks/challeng.html#wdcb, which lists books threatened by censorship and reports on children's books that have been banned.

■ **Check** *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com, for a list of best-selling children's books.

■ **See** our web site for our Public Policy Resolution on Democratic

Values (www.waort.org/demvaluesres.htm), which states that we support "freedom from acts of censorship." Make sure your members know where we stand.

'Novel' reading idea

A new reading program that began in Seattle, made its way to Los Angeles, and then was put on the educational map by Chicago, is spreading. Last fall, Mayor Richard Daley asked every citizen of Chicago to read Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird*. The program, "One Book, One Chicago," electrified the city. Public libraries checked out the book 6,500 times in seven weeks. Amazon.com reports the book went from 250th to 51st in national sales. The city got corporate

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sponsors, published a resource guide for teachers, and distributed 40,000 lapel pins that asked, "Are you reading *Mockingbird*?" The library held book discussions – many just for teenagers – with professional moderators.

There has been an increase in the popularity of communal reading – not just by communities and cities, but also by book clubs and at bookstore events. It is a response to the loneliness of modern life, an antidote to the "bowling alone" syndrome coined by Harvard's Robert Putnam, which describes the downturn in civic participation. Further, it gives people a common shared experience after Sept. 11, when people reached out to each other.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Learn** more about this project at the following web sites: The Chicago Public Library (www.chipublib.org) and the California Humanities Council (www.calhum.org).

■ **Ask** your members if they would like to start a book club. Check out www.barnesandnoble.com and www.amazon.com for book ideas and books. Your members can choose new books, those selected by Oprah Winfrey, or classics. Run an ad in your bulletin asking for responses.

■ **Research** your community. If adults from all walks of life enjoy reading and talking about books, so would younger people. Juvenile Hall and Juvenile Court, or whatever they are called in your community, would benefit from a book club where teens read a book and then discuss it with an adult. They would also profit from receiving books as part of our "Adopt-A-Shelf" campaign. Also in need are teenage mothers. What does your community do for

them? Your local bookstores may want to help initiate a project.

Charitable choice again – or yet?

In February, Sen. Lieberman (D-Conn.) and Sen. Santorum (R-Pa.) introduced a compromise supported by President Bush to the Charitable Aid, Recovery and Empowerment Act (CARE) of 2002, S. 1924. According to Marc D. Stern, American Jewish Congress Assistant Executive Director, the compromise proposed would permit unlimited proselytizing at government expense, and "ignore most of the contentious issues, with the result that it offers far less protection for church/state separation and the religious liberty of participants than existing charitable choice law."

The bill also does not address discrimination in hiring by religious institutions receiving federal funding for social programs.

Although the AJCongress opposes the changes made, they do recognize the bill's attractive tax features including IRA charitable rollover and non-itemized deductions for charitable contributions, as well as funding increases for the Social Services Block Grant.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Look up** WAO's Resolution on Church and State Issues, included in our Resolution on Democratic Values, at www.waort.org/dem-valuesres.htm.

■ **Ask** your members to call, write or e-mail their senators, and urge them to vote against this compromise. Look up senators' contact information at www.senate.gov. Addresses are also listed in the

front of your phone book under Government, U.S.

■ **Research** more information for your members at the web sites of the following organizations: American Jewish Congress (www.ajcongress.org), Jewish Council for Public Affairs (www.jewishpublicaffairs.org), and Americans United (www.au.org).

Get your message out there

As the deluge of e-mail they receive continues to increase, many members of Congress no longer disclose their e-mail addresses to constituents. Both staff members and lobbyists say that e-mail is far less successful than faxes, phone calls or letters in reaching and influencing legislators. Further, e-mail is unlikely to receive an acknowledgement that it has been received or read.

The New York Times News Service recently conducted a test on the efficacy of e-mail and found "e-mail aversion" on both sides of the Capitol. According to Rep. Brad Carson (D-Okla.), "There's an institutional bias against adopting new technology." His office responds to e-mail within three or four days, he said. But that practice remains an exception where most elected officials have office procedures that are built around logging and answering "snail mail."

According to a consulting firm that works with Congress, there are four guidelines for effective e-mail: 1. Include your full name and postal address; 2. Communicate only with your own representative; 3. Put the message in your own words and tell your story; 4. Address one topic per

message. These guidelines apply to all messages to your legislators, whether by e-mail, snail mail or fax.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Publish** the guidelines in your bulletin. Give your members information on the issues we care about, and the names and contact information of legislators.

■ **Look up** www.congressonline-project.org for interesting information on Congress and e-mail. It is a two-year research project financed by the Pew Charitable Trusts and conducted by the Congressional Management Foundation and George Washington University.

Justices weigh arguments on Ohio vouchers

The Supreme Court heard arguments on the Cleveland school voucher plan on Feb. 20. The program provides as much as \$2,250 each to nearly 4,300 kindergarten to eighth-grade students. Most of these students are from families living in poverty. This money can be used for tuition at private, parochial or public schools, but almost 99% of Cleveland's voucher students – according to a recent count – have enrolled in religious schools. The Supreme Court is to decide, not whether this is good educational policy, but whether this use of tax monies violates the

Constitution's ban on "the establishment of religion." Leaders of the voucher movement believe that a victory will encourage other states to experiment with greater subsidies for parochial schools. Further, the approval for aid to private schools could clear the way for President Bush's "faith-based initiative."

The Cleveland plan has offered parents fewer choices than its backers had promised. The suburban schools did not permit students to transfer from the city, and



exclusive private schools would not take students who could pay only \$2,500. Therefore, nearly all who accept vouchers – wind up in parochial schools. The Bush Administration supports vouchers and other aid programs for religious schools. The President's budget calls for a \$2,500 federal tax credit for parents paying tuition for elementary and secondary schools. Reports on the Court's deliberations thus far indicate a strong possibility that vouchers will be approved. A ruling in this case, *Zelman vs. Simmons-Harris*, is expected by late June. An organization, PEARL (Public Education and Religious Liberty), has filed an amicus curiae.

Courts throughout the country have increasingly changed the course of American life and justice. As of Jan. 24, the Senate Judiciary Committee has held 12 hearings on President Bush's nom-

inees to federal circuit courts, resulting in 30 confirmations. There are 99 federal court vacancies, and Republicans are urging quick Senate confirmation of many right-wing judges. Rights, such as reproductive freedom, civil rights, and separation of church and state – that we as members of Women's American ORT believe should be supported – are in danger. We also face the threat of a Supreme Court vacancy, and President Bush will almost certainly pick a right-wing supporter. Just one new Supreme Court justice could endanger the future of *Roe vs. Wade* and change the face of American justice for decades.

✓WHAT YOUR CHAPTER CAN DO

■ **Read** about the Supreme Court hearings on Cleveland vouchers and about vouchers in general at www.rethinkingschools.org/SpecPub/voucher.htm.

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Educating for Life

■ **Communicate** with your senators and express your opinion about candidates for federal court vacancies. You may want to contact your local bar association for information on nominees. Read updates and contact your senators at www.now.org/congress.

22 years after CEDAW, still have way to go

At the height of the women's movement, the U.N. drafted the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) to redress human rights abuses against women. The Convention was adopted by the General Assembly in December 1979, and to date has been ratified by 168 nations. The U.S., which was an active participant in drafting the document, signed it in 1980, but has delayed its ratification for over 22 years. President Carter sent it to the Senate Foreign Relations Committee for review, and until it submits that review to the Senate, the process cannot be completed.

The treaty sets standards to end discrimination against women in areas such as education, health care, employment and wages, financial credit, and participation in political and public life.

A committee of 23 experts monitors the implementation of the Convention in the nations that have ratified or acceded to it. They are legally bound to put its provisions into practice. The committee meets twice a year to review reports from eight of the states that are party to the Convention.

This year, we attended the open meeting of the committee and received quite an education. Prior to the state reports, the Non-

Governmental Organizations (NGOs) of the reporting nations offer reports of their own. It was most enlightening to compare reports. For the most part, NGOs relate less progress towards the discrimination goals than the countries, and they are more explicit about the pressing needs of women. Of great interest were the questions put to the national reporters by the experts. When one thought that all avenues had been covered in the state reports, the experts posed incisive questions, many of which required the national reporter to search for a response.

Of the nations reporting at this session, we heard NGOs from developing nations discuss the wars in their small countries and the lack of progress in the women's movement. Iceland's NGO and state reports were closely aligned and positive in their outlook.

In December 2000, the Optional Protocol to the Convention was put into practice. This Protocol entitles the committee to consider petitions from individual women or groups of women who have exhausted national remedies. It also entitles the committee to conduct inquiries into grave or systematic violations of the Convention. Twenty-eight states are party to the Optional Protocol.

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issues that reflect
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If you follow up on the
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suggestions, what
results have you gotten?

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