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RELIGIOUS FREEDOM ON TRIAL IN NEBRASKA

The most underreported news story of the last year is the case of the seven fathers who have been in a Nebraska jail since November 23 because they have been exercising their parental rights and religious freedom to send their children to a noncertified Christian school. If a half dozen civil rights demonstrators from the other side of the political spectrum were kept so long in a southern jail without being charged with any crime, you can be sure that network-newscasts would give us emotional and redundant coverage.

But there is a deafening silence in the national media about the Nebraska Seven and about their wives who have fled Nebraska in order to avoid being jailed, too. Although the fathers were in jail over Thanksgiving, Christmas and New Year's, they didn't receive one percent of the national media coverage given to the Cabbage Patch dolls.

With all the thugs and criminals prowling our streets, it is a puzzlement that, here in America, noncriminals can be held so long in jail without bail. The judge locked up the fathers for refusing to answer questions about their role in the church and school, and he denied the fathers' attempt to plead the Fifth Amendment.

Only if you are a reader of conservative or religious publications have you been kept posted on the incredible story of Faith Baptist Church school in Louisville, Nebraska, and its Pastor, Everett Sileven. Only then would you know that more than 800 ministers plus a thousand other Christian leaders from some 40 states have traveled to Nebraska to show their public support of the imprisoned fathers.

If there ever was a David-and-Goliath struggle, this is it. The "David," a little church school with about 30 students in a town of only 1,000 people southwest of Omaha, has been pitted in a dramatic confrontation with a "Goliath" -- the State of Nebraska, its Department of Education, and the National Education Association (NEA).

On October 18, 1982, 18 armed officers entered Faith Baptist Church, broke up a prayer meeting, dragged a hundred worshippers out of the church, padlocked the doors, and stationed armed guards to prevent reentry.

Pastor Sileven himself spent four months in jail in 1982 for contempt of court, although he has never been charged with any crime. One of his fellow prisoners in jail had shot and killed two men, but he spent a total of only three weeks in jail.

There is not and never was any problem about the 30 pupils getting an adequate education in Faith Christian School. Tests consistently show that they are one to three years ahead of public school pupils of the same age. The teachers are college graduates and Pastor Sileven has three degrees.

The school uses the curriculum called Accelerated Christian Education. This system is now in use in some 5,000 other schools across the country, where its pupils are doing excellent academic work.

Nebraska is one of only six of the 50 states which require licensure of all private schools and certification of every private school teacher. Faith Christian School was the first school in Nebraska to refuse to apply for a license, and the heavy arm of the state has retaliated massively.

Faith Christian's teachers and parents decline to seek a state license because compliance with these state regulations would violate their religious freedom. For example, Pastor Sileven objects to the State Board of Education's Rule 14 which says that all Christian and parochial schools must be substantially the same as the public schools.

Rule 14 also states that a high school must have 3,000 volumes in its library and 98% of them must be religious-free. Rule 21 requires that all teachers take a minimum number of university courses in education.

These parents have sacrificially assumed the heavy expense of maintaining a Christian school precisely because they want their children in a school different from public schools, using books with a Christian rather than a religious-free perspective, and taught by teachers with a Christian perspective rather than the secular humanist perspective taught in university education courses.

One wonders why conservative, middle-western Nebraska became the front line in the battle between religious schools and the state. Pastor Sileven says this is the legacy of the famous John Dewey who came to Nebraska in the 1920s and set up his pilot program there, including a teachers' college within the state university and the initial framework of the NEA.