
A S S O C I A T E D B A P T I S T P R E S S

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As drug trial begins, Noriega continues to testify to faith

By Greg Warner

**SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
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MIAMI (ABP) -- Word from Manuel Noriega's prison cell is that the deposed Panamanian dictator and professed born-again Christian is ready to face the U.S. government's charges of drug smuggling.

Jury selection in the celebrated case began Sept. 5 in Miami, where Noriega has been jailed since surrendering to U.S. agents in Panama Jan. 10, 1990. Accused of accepting \$4.6 million in bribes from Columbian drug traffickers, Noriega could be sentenced to 165 years in prison if convicted.

Miami Baptist layman Tony Ponceti, one of the few people who has visited Noriega since his arrest, said he found the general's spirits to be "pretty good" the last time he visited him, Aug. 15.

"He said, 'Tony, I don't know what's going to come from this trial, but I'm ready for whatever comes,'" Ponceti recalled. "He's as strong as we could expect at this point."

According to Ponceti, Noriega is still testifying to his newfound faith. During the visit, Noriega gave Ponceti a statement handwritten in Spanish and signed by the prisoner.

"Every day that passes I find in the Lord the joy necessary to understand that his mercy is infinite and it is poured upon those humans that call to him," the note said, "and that being in the Lord, through the sacred name of Jesus his son, we are more than conquerors, because for God nothing is impossible."

Noriega has spent the last 20 months in an isolation cell at the Metropolitan Correctional Center outside Miami. He has accepted few visitors and spoken with no reporters since his capture.

But he did allow Texas evangelists Rudy Hernandez and Clift Brannon to visit him in May 1990. During the visit, the evangelists led Noriega to make a public profession of faith in Christ. For the past year, Ponceti has visited Noriega almost weekly at the general's request, leading Noriega in Bible studies.

Noriega's wife and three daughters visited him for the first time in late August. Wife Felicidad and daughters Sandra Beauchamp and Lorena and Thays Noriega, who have been living in the Dominican Republic since Noriega's arrest, were permitted visas to enter the United States Aug. 21.

Felicidad and at least two of the daughters also have professed faith in Christ in recent months. The family arrived in Miami Aug. 23.

In a news conference Aug. 30, Felicidad Noriega told reporters her husband was sincere when he asked to be baptized in prison -- a request that so far has been denied by prison officials.

"People will always express doubt about my husband's claim that he has become a born-again Christian," she said in an article in the Miami Herald. "I can tell you that our household has always had a deep belief in Christianity, and only his faith in God has been able to keep him going through this difficult period in our lives."

Sandra Beauchamp said her father still has "the good spirit and humor that he's always had."

Of the charges against him, Beauchamp said: "Of course, we got mad at people who are saying things that are not true. He's still our father. We have always seen him as our partner, our father, our friend. It's difficult to hear somebody say bad things about someone who is not a bad man."

Ponceti, a member of a Baptist mission church in Miami, said the visas for Noriega's family are an answer to the general's prayers. The visas were repeatedly denied by the U.S. government.

Ponceti, who has shunned publicity about his role as Noriega's spiritual tutor, said he does not discuss with the general the charges against him. The layman said he has not attended any of the pretrial hearings and does not plan to attend the trial. "I'm going to do the best I can not to become part of the media (attention)," he said.

Ponceti said it has been "a little more difficult" to get in to see Noriega since news of his conversion became public last March.

Ponceti was required to undergo training as a volunteer chaplain, which he did. But he refused to sign a standard agreement with the prison that would have required him to tell prison officials if Noriega confessed to any crimes and prohibited him from developing a personal relationship with the prisoner.

Ponceti now visits as an individual at Noriega's request. But authorization for those visits been more sporadic than before, he said. "It's been difficult to have any kind of continuing (Bible) study," Ponceti said, adding he and Noriega are still studying the Bible together when possible.

During the upcoming trial, Noriega will be held in a specially designed facility underneath the federal courthouse. Ponceti said Noriega's lawyers are making arrangements for him to meet with the general there.

A spokesperson for the U.S. Attorney's Office in Miami, which is prosecuting Noriega, said the defendant's profession of faith has had no effect on the case and won't affect the trial.

"We are proceeding with the allegations and feel he should be held responsible," said Diane Cossin, herself a born-again Christian and former Southern Baptist.

Cossin, executive assistant to the U.S. Attorney, declined to comment on the sincerity of Noriega's reported conversion and said she expects the topic to "stay outside the courtroom" during the trial.

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Boyce reopens Indiana center
despite earlier dispute

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Boyce Bible School has resumed operations in Indiana, more than one year after the school's Indiana campus was closed

due to a dispute with the state convention executive director.

Boyce, an arm of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., operates 18 centers in 10 states to provide ministerial training for people without college degrees.

Boyce's eight-year venture in Indiana was closed in May 1990 as the result of a dispute between seminary administrators and Mark Coppenger, who was then executive director of the State Convention of Baptists in Indiana. Coppenger has since left Indiana to become vice president for public relations with the Southern Baptist Executive Committee in Nashville, Tenn.

After private discussions between Coppenger and Southern's then-provost Willis Bennett, Coppenger wrote a lengthy article in the Indiana Baptist that was critical of the Boyce School and Southern Seminary. That prompted Bennett to close the Indiana center, saying the Boyce School could no longer function effectively in such a climate.

The dispute involved charges by Coppenger that Southern Seminary demanded absolute loyalty from Indiana Baptists involved in the center and charges by Southern Seminary that Coppenger wanted to control teacher and textbook selections.

The new Boyce center opened in Indianapolis Aug. 23 under sponsorship of the Metropolitan Baptist Association. The previous venture was sponsored by the state convention. Harmon Moore, state convention executive director from 1959-80, is acting director of the new center.

All parties involved say the Boyce School returned to Indiana because of student requests.

"We began to get requests from former students who were unable to finish their track in the Boyce program," said James Abernathy, director of associational missions. "Others who had not been involved before said they were interested in the Boyce program."

So far, 13 students have enrolled for the fall semester. At the time Boyce ceased operations in 1990, enrollment at the Indianapolis and Kokomo locations was 38. Five courses now are taught. Classes meet at a Baptist church in Indianapolis rather than at the state convention office building, where they were previously held.

The association's executive board gave "almost unanimous" approval for the new venture, Abernathy said. "They gave us great encouragement to go right ahead."

Abernathy said the new state convention leadership has not shown any opposition to Boyce's return. New Indiana executive director Charles Sullivan could not be reached for comment.

Southern Seminary Provost Larry McSwain said he sees no reason for conflict with the new arrangement. "Our previous problems were centered in some criticisms by one person who is no longer on the scene.... We look for a long and happy relationship with Indiana Baptists."

However, the Boyce School returns to Indiana with competition from Oklahoma Baptist University, which opened five off-campus centers in the state after Boyce left in 1990.

OBU's Ministry Training Institute offers courses in Indianapolis, Evansville, New Albany, Hope and Crownpoint. Dick Rader, dean of OBU's school of Christian service, said he anticipates enrollment to reach about 40 this fall.

Rader explained that OBU came to Indiana at Coppenger's request after the Boyce center closed. "I regretted the circumstances under which we went, yet I didn't feel I had any grounds for refusing," he said.

"We were invited into this. We didn't pursue it."

There is little difference between the types of courses OBU and Boyce offer in Indiana. Rader said if the OBU program has any advantage, it is that students can more easily apply their work toward the bachelor's degree.

Boyce awards diplomas, not degrees, but its courses are accredited and transferable to other degree-granting schools.

OBU operates similar off-campus programs for about 300 students in Oklahoma and is exploring opportunities in other states without Baptist colleges, Rader said.

Abernathy said he does not see the two programs as competitors. "One of the faculty members who will be teaching in the OBU program also will be teaching with Boyce," he said. "There should be no reason to question the matter of each school existing.

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Hunger gifts down in SBC,
up among others denominations

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- While world-hunger contributions to some of the largest American denominations are up sharply so far this year, hunger gifts sent to the Southern Baptist Convention continue a six-year downward slide.

According to an informal survey by the Baptist Center for Ethics, donations to the largest Catholic, Lutheran and mainline/orthodox hunger-relief agencies are up between 10 percent and 33 percent for the first seven months of 1991.

Meanwhile, world-hunger contributions to the SBC Foreign Mission Board stand 3 percent behind the 1990 pace to date.

John Cheyne, director of the FMB's human-needs program, reported the FMB has received \$2,901,697 in hunger money from Southern Baptists so far this year, compared to \$2,976,523 for the same period last year.

The SBC Home Mission Board, which handles contributions for stateside hunger needs, reported receiving \$549,952 for the same seven-month period, 6 percent below the \$585,686 received by this time last year.

Hunger gifts in the SBC have been on the decline since 1985, when Southern Baptists recorded their largest-ever annual contribution of \$11,830,146. At the current pace, SBC giving for both overseas and domestic hunger this year will total between half and two thirds of the 1985 record amount.

Cheyne blamed the national economic recession in part for the slumping SBC hunger contributions. He also cited a lack of awareness about SBC programs that meet human needs in the context of evangelism and the FMB's inability to make direct appeals for hunger gifts.

The 15 million Southern Baptists, who comprise the nation's largest Protestant denomination, gave an average of 52 cents per person to combat hunger in 1990, based on the year-end total of \$7,780,072.

Southern Baptists will highlight hunger needs Oct. 13 during the denomination's annual World Hunger Day observance.

While SBC hunger giving has struggled to keep pace, other American denominations have posted increases, aided in part by well-publicized hunger calamities, said Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, which opened its Nashville office Sept. 1.

"Media coverage of the human suffering from the Bangladesh cyclone, the Persian Gulf War and the African war-related famine, plus extensive hunger appeals, are the two major components contributing to the surge in giving among many Christian communions," said Parham, who directed hunger concerns for the SBC Christian Life Commission before joining the new ethics center.

The Catholic Relief Services experienced the largest upswing, followed by the National Council of Churches' Church World Service and the

Evangelical Lutheran Church in America.

"Our hunger appeals are up about one third over last year," reported Jennifer Habte, associate program director for media for Catholic Relief Services, the international relief and development arm of the U.S. Catholic Conference.

"It is a good thing to see that people still care when their belts are being tightened," Habte said.

But, she added, the need is still greater than the response. With 30 million people in Africa facing "dire food needs," she said, hunger contributions received to date "will not come near the need."

Habte declined to release the total amount of CRS hunger receipts so far for 1991. But she said annual contributions ran around \$51 million in 1990, resulting from direct mail appeals to individuals, corporations, groups and foundations.

Church World Service, the relief, development and refugee resettlement arm of the National Council of Churches, reports a 13.6 percent increase in hunger gifts. For the first seven months of 1991, CWS received \$7.5 million, compared to \$6.6 million for the same time period in 1990.

David Evans, director of fund-raising programs for CWS, attributed the increase to a "very knowledgeable and responsive constituency." He said that when "the world experiences urgent dramas, natural or human-made, we get a large outpouring of money."

CWS expects to receive a total of \$21.7 million in 1991, with 50 percent of those contributions given in November and December.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America reported that its hunger gifts are 10.5 percent ahead of last year.

Roger Livdhal, director of ELCA's world-hunger appeal, said \$4.2 million was received between January and July, compared to \$3.8 million for the same period in 1990. He noted that ELCA has received an additional \$532,567 in hunger-relief funds designated for specific disasters beyond its normal hunger appeal.

Most of the funds come from local congregational offerings, not direct individual appeals. Lutherans are encouraged to give to hunger on a monthly basis.

The ELCA has 5.2 million members. Its adult members gave an estimated \$3.50 per person in 1990 to the denomination's hunger appeal. ELCA's regular hunger fund is expected to receive over \$11 million in 1991.

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God's role in television
reduced mostly to reruns

By Gayle White

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Bart Simpson bows his spiked orange head to pray. Around the dinner table, blue-haired mother Marge, balding father Homer, self-righteous Lisa and pacifier-sucking Maggie wait for him to recite the blessing.

"Dear God," he says, "we paid for all this stuff ourselves, so thanks for nothing."

The Simpsons may be the most religious family on prime-time television. Despite the irreverence, the Fox network's animated characters have been shown discussing Sunday school lessons and attending church-sponsored counseling.

More than 90 percent of the American population claims to believe in God, but the average viewer in a top-10 television market, who watches

about 40 hours of television every week, rarely hears a whisper of a prayer. In contrast, viewers are exposed to an estimated 14,000 sexual references in a year's worth of television viewing.

There's no indication that this fall's prime-time lineup, with its record number of situation comedies -- 55 -- will be any different. Network executives are reluctant even to discuss religion's role on television.

God apparently is not ready for prime time.

"It's not that religion is treated as bad or irrelevant. It's not treated at all," said Robert Lichter, co-author of "Watching America," a new book about 30 years of American television.

A recent survey indicates that three-fourths of the Christians in the United States attend church at least once a month, but television families are rarely seen filling the prime-time pews.

Even the all-American Huxtables on "The Cosby Show" (NBC) -- hailed as the most wholesome television family since "Father Knows Best" -- rarely mention church, much less go there.

But Baptist ethics professor Ray Higgins sympathizes with the task of TV writers, who must make their programming appeal to a diverse audience in a pluralistic society.

"It's difficult to talk about God on TV, especially when you have to package God for the masses," said Higgins, assistant professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Sitcoms are basically entertainment appealing to the masses," Higgins said. "How can a truthful presentation about God be made when that is your starting point?"

"You jeopardize the truthfulness about God the more you look for a mass audience and broad appeal," said Higgins, who teaches a class on media ethics at Southwestern.

Television writers also must contend with differing views of God, Higgins added. While polls show 90 percent of Americans believe in God, "that doesn't mean they have a loyalty to God or a personal relationship to him."

Even Christians have diverse views about God, noted Higgins, an associate in the new Baptist Center for Ethics. Any TV portrayal of God "is going to be acceptable to some people and not acceptable to others," he said.

"I'm sure great care is taken in portraying religion, so as not to offend anyone," said ABC publicist Jeff DeRome. "That's probably why you don't see much of it."

When Jewish characters are featured -- such as on ABC's short-lived "Chicken Soup" -- their religion is treated more as a matter of ethnic identity than one of spirituality.

"You don't get families where both parents are Jewish and they deal with important issues of Judaism," said Rabbi Arnold Goodman of the Ahavath Achim synagogue in Atlanta. "We're waiting to see a portrayal of a 'normal' Jewish family on television."

Religion once was treated with greater respect.

Lichter, founder of the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, defines several stages of prime-time religion:

-- The Golden Age. During the 1950s and early 1960s, the Andersons went to Sunday school ("Father Knows Best"), Andy and Barney sang in the Mayberry church choir ("The Andy Griffith Show"), and television pointedly endorsed mainstream religious values.

-- The Social Revolution. In the social upheaval of the period that followed, television writers and producers were more likely to use religious figures as mavericks to challenge the status quo -- such as a Catholic priest who harbored Vietnam deserters on "The Bold Ones."

-- The Righteous Right. In the 1980s, religious figures were often

portrayed as narrow-minded, judgmental and materialistic. A "Twilight Zone" episode about an evangelical minister with the authority to assign people to hell was typical of television's portrayal of conservative Christians.

-- The Vanishing. More recently religion has all but disappeared from prime time. Recent series with religious themes, such as NBC's "Sister Kate" or ABC's "Have Faith," used religion as a backdrop. ABC's "Father Dowling" -- without his collar -- could be "Matlock."

Sandra Crawford, editor of TV Etc., a magazine of the conservative Media Research Center, said the entertainment industry ducks opportunities to treat religion constructively.

Of "Amen," a defunct NBC comedy series starring Sherman Hemsley as a deacon, she said, "Change a few titles and it could easily have taken place in a post office."

Norman Lear's CBS comedy series "Sunday Dinner" created controversy because a character regularly addressed prayers to "Chief." But in subsequent episodes, religious references diminished.

"By and large, I think prime time is giving us a very negative portrayal of the Christian faith in particular and most religion in general," said Randall Murphree, who has monitored television for the American Family Association for eight years.

There are, of course, exceptions from recent seasons:

-- "Designing Women" (CBS). Mary Jo meets a good-looking bachelor who turns out to be a minister, but she finds -- surprise! -- he's a fun date anyway.

-- "thirtysomething" (ABC). After his wife and child survive an automobile accident, Michael rediscovers his own Jewish faith. "I believe in God," he says. "I didn't think I did, but I do."

-- "American Dreamer" (NBC). An episode is devoted to a struggle of faith for main character Tom Nash, whose wife was killed in a terrorist attack. The town's new Episcopal minister -- a woman -- tells him, "I believe that when she was caught in that explosion, God's heart was the first to break."

"We got a ton of personal letters from people who appreciated seeing religion portrayed on television in a realistic way," producer Bruce Helford says.

Helford, who is Jewish, says it's important to him "to see if there's some way within a show to deal with religion in a way we haven't seen it done before."

The sister of an "American Dreamer" writer is an Episcopal priest, Mr. Helford said. "What writers write about is what they live."

That may be a major reason for the dearth of realistic religion on television.

A 1983 survey by the Center for Media and Public Affairs published in Public Opinion magazine showed that among 104 Hollywood decision makers, only 7 percent characterized themselves as "regular church-goers." Almost half listed "none" when asked their religion.

Religion "is not a part of their lives, and they don't make it part of their characters' lives," said Elizabeth Thoman, a Catholic nun and founder of Media and Values, a 15-year-old educational newsletter about the media.

This attitude toward religion by people who shaped much of the culture of the last decade is taking a heavy toll, she said.

"If we don't see it in our popular culture, we tend to privatize religion as something that doesn't have anything to do with our day-to-day life," she said. "That's very dangerous. We have ignored the kind of questions that give our life meaning and purpose, individually and as a community."

-- Gayle White is staff writer for the Atlanta Journal and Atlanta Constitution. This story, which is reproduced with permission from the Journal and Constitution, includes information from Associated Baptist Press.

Four Baptist universities
rank as 'Money' best buys

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Four major Baptist universities -- Samford, Wake Forest, Baylor and Furman -- are among 100 schools nationwide highlighted in the 1991 'Money Magazine' guide to "Best College Buys," released on newsstands the first week of September.

Chosen for their value -- based on quality of academic program, selectivity of students and faculty, and cost of tuition -- the 100 schools included a mix of 44 state-assisted and 56 private colleges and universities.

Rice University in Houston was ranked No. 1. Among the Baptist schools, Wake Forest University in North Carolina ranked 36th, Baylor University in Texas 37th, Samford University in Alabama 40th and Furman University in South Carolina 75th.

In all, 1,001 fully accredited four-year schools were evaluated by the magazine for the 1991 listing.

Among the lowest-cost private schools on the top-100 "best buy" list were Baylor (\$6,000) and Samford (\$6,540). Tuition of private schools on the list ranged from \$16,900 at Massachusetts Institute of Technology to \$4,560 at St. Mary's of Maryland.

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Soviet upheaval doesn't remove
nuclear threat, Stassen says

By Greg Warner

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The disintegration of communist domination in the Soviet Union is not necessarily good news for the cause of world peace, says seminary professor and peace advocate Glen Stassen.

"It depends on how we respond to it," said Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Although the failed coup by communist hard-liners demonstrates the power of the Soviet people to determine their national destiny, it does little to reduce the risk posed by the production and use of nuclear weapons, said Stassen, a former nuclear physicist and advocate of a nuclear freeze.

He cited three reasons:

-- The threat of an exchange of nuclear weapons between the United States and the Soviet Union still exists, Stassen said, even though such an exchange would likely be by mistake.

"The threat of nuclear weapons never was that the Soviet government would make a nuclear war; they would be devastated if they did," explained Stassen, who used his training as a nuclear researcher to help develop the U.S. government's early-warning radar system "to tell us when the Russians were coming."

"The threat comes from false radar warnings," he said, "plus the perception that we are developing the accuracy to destroy each other's

weapons."

-- Posing the second threat, Stassen continued, is the weakening of control from the central Soviet government. "Will several republics get nuclear weapons now?" he asked.

That concern was on the minds of both President Bush and British Prime Minister John Major a week after the coup. Both said they needed assurances about who will now control the Soviets' vast nuclear capabilities.

Russian President Boris Yeltsin sought similar assurances by asking for veto power over any decision to launch Soviet nuclear weapons, which during the three-day coup were apparently in the hands of the coup leaders.

Yeltsin said Sept. 3 that nuclear weapons will be moved from the republics of Kazakhstan and the Ukraine to Russia. The presence of nuclear weapons in Kazakhstan, which accounts for as much as 20 percent of the Soviet nuclear arsenal, became an issue in a border dispute in that republic Aug. 29.

Meanwhile, an Aug. 29 decree by Kazakhstan closed the Semipalatinsk nuclear-testing range in that republic.

Stassen inspected the testing site in Kazakhstan this summer while participating in a Kazakh-American cultural exchange sponsored by Southern Baptists.

-- A third threat, Stassen said, is the proliferation of nuclear weapons into other nations. With the reduced role of the two superpowers in international affairs, the likelihood that smaller countries will develop and perhaps use nuclear weapons increases, according to some experts.

"These three threats are not going away because of what is happening in the Soviet Union," Stassen warned. "They are increasing."

Still, he said, the overthrow of communism in the Soviet Union offers great hope as well.

"It gives us encouragement about the power of the people. The (Soviet) people have done so much to make this happen, more than people realize," said Stassen, who recently wrote a book on people power.

"The movement to stop the coup was non-violent direct action," he said. The use of non-violent action "is spreading all over the world," he said. "Even the revolution that brought the Ayatollah to power in Iran was non-violent direct action, although the Ayatollah was not non-violent."

Now that the Soviet people have discovered the power they possess, Stassen said, it may invigorate the Soviet peace movement.

During Stassen's visit to the Soviet Union this summer -- his second -- he stayed in the home of the leader of Civil Peace, a Soviet peace organization. Soviet peace activists have made a movie about the effects of nuclear-weapons testing, Stassen said, and in June and July they held two anti-nuclear rallies. One rally drew 20,000 people, he said, even though such demonstrations are a new phenomenon in the Soviet Union.

One focus of the Soviet peace movement is a ban on testing of new nuclear weapons.

This summer Stassen was part of a 13-member medical team that viewed the effects of earlier tests at Semipalatinsk in eastern Kazakhstan, site of hundreds of underground and above-ground tests between 1949 and 1989. "The damage is far worse than we thought," Stassen reported.

Even without the launch of a nuclear attack, Stassen said, nuclear weapons pose a threat to humans because the various steps of production -- mining of uranium, testing, and manufacturing -- can cause cancer.

A halt to testing new weapons worldwide is the key to reducing the nuclear threat, Stassen said. "The point of testing is to see whether new types of bombs work," he explained. If the test is successful, he added, "it commits you to a fuel chain" that leads inevitably to production of the weapon.

"The testing is the camel's nose under the tent," he concluded.

Now that Kazakhstan and other Soviet republics are exerting their independence, Stassen said, it may add new strength to the movement to ban nuclear testing in the Soviet Union and elsewhere.

Although Soviet President Mikhail Gorbachev stopped the tests several years ago, they were set to resume after the U.S. government declined to stop its own nuclear tests.

"It was because of our actions that they wanted to continue testing," Stassen said. "It really just leaves it up to us."

"We can't continue to test and say...we are for peace," he said.

Stassen, 55, said his earlier career as a nuclear researcher "was a major factor" in his later denunciation of nuclear proliferation.

"It made me think all the time about the increasing danger we were building," he recalled. "Most people preferred not to think about it. But if you're working with it every day, it's hard not to think about it."

Even earlier, however, when the United States dropped the atomic bomb on Hiroshima during World War II, Stassen saw the impending danger. At the time, his father was serving in the South Pacific. "That vision of the mushroom cloud has been a pivotal point for me," recalled Stassen, who was 9 at the time.

Although he later worked for the Naval Research Laboratory, on the early-warning system and on other nuclear-related projects, his opposition to nuclear weapons grew.

"It was clear to me it was going to get worse and worse," he said.

"I decided my contribution ought to be not how to make them better, but how to get them under control."

Although the threat of nuclear weapons causes many people to fear for the future, Stassen said it should call Christians to action.

"The question is not 'What is going to happen and when?' The question is 'What are we doing in the meantime? We need to turn speculation into self-examination.'"

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