
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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Israel, PLO take historic risk
to achieve peace in Middle East

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In what President Clinton described as a "brave gamble that the future can be better than the past," leaders of Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization embarked Sept. 13 on what they hope will be a new era of peace in the Middle East.

Representatives of Israel and the PLO signed an agreement calling for interim Palestinian self-rule in Gaza and the West Bank town of Jericho. The interim agreements are intended to lead to a more permanent solution to Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat and Israeli Prime Minister Yitshak Rabin, longtime and bitter enemies, shook hands to climax the dramatic and emotional ceremony on the White House South Lawn Sept. 13.

"We wish to open a new chapter in the sad book of our lives together, a chapter of mutual recognition, of good neighborliness, or mutual respect, of understanding," Rabin said.

Addressing Palestinians, Rabin declared: "We are destined to live together on the same soil in the same land. ... We who have fought against you, the Palestinians, we say to you today in a loud and a clear voice: Enough of blood and tears. Enough!"

For those victimized by the bloody history of Middle East conflict, Rabin said, "this ceremony has come too late."

After citing the Old Testament Book of Ecclesiastes' statement that there is a time of war and a time of peace, Rabin declared, "Ladies and gentlemen, the time for peace has come."

Arafat also expressed hope that the agreement will lead to peace but warned that it will require courage and determination.

"My people are hoping that this agreement which we are signing today marks the beginning of the end of a chapter of pain and suffering which has lasted throughout this century," he said.

"My people are hoping that this agreement which we are signing today will usher in an age of peace, coexistence and equal rights."

Arafat said putting an end to Palestinian feelings of being wronged "is the strongest guarantee to achieve coexistence and openness between our two peoples and future generations.

"Our two peoples are awaiting today this historic hope, and they want to give peace a real chance."

The agreement, signed by Israeli Foreign Minister Shimon Peres and PLO official Mahmoud Abbas, provides a framework for resolving the century-long dispute between Jews and Arabs over Palestine.

"That hallowed piece of earth, that land of life and revelation is home to the memories and dreams of Jews, Muslims and Christians throughout the world," Clinton said. "As we all know, devotion to that land has also been the source of conflict and bloodshed for too long."

Clinton pledged U.S. support for "the difficult work that lies ahead." Pointing to the Israeli and Arab children among the 3,000 people present at the ceremony, he urged leaders to dedicate themselves to the region's next generation.

"We must not betray their future," he said. "For too long, the young of the Middle East have been caught in a web of hatred not of their own making.

"For too long, they have been taught from the chronicles of war. Now we can give them the chance to know the season of peace."

In closing remarks, Clinton referred to the toppling of the walls of Jericho, comments reportedly added to his speech after waking at 3 a.m. and reading the Old Testament Book of Joshua.

"The sound we heard today," he said, "once again as in ancient Jericho, was of trumpets toppling walls, the walls of anger and suspicion between Israeli and Palestinian, between Arab and Jew. This time, praise God, the trumpets herald not the destruction of that city but its new beginning."

Many who have labored long for Middle East peace attended the ceremony, including former presidents Jimmy Carter and George Bush.

Less than 24 hours after the Israeli-PLO agreement was signed, the cause of Middle East peace again was advanced when Israel and Jordan signed an agreement framed to resolve differences between the neighboring countries.

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Baptists find hope
in historic peace pact

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Representatives of the Palestine Liberation Organization and Israel gave birth to hope Sept. 13 as they signed the historic framework for peace, according to Baptist experts on the Mideast and past peace efforts.

Former president Jimmy Carter, a Southern Baptist layman, was among 3,000 guests at the White House ceremony in which the pact was signed. Fourteen years ago, then-President Carter helped to mediate the Camp David peace accords between Israel and Egypt.

"This is the opening of a door that cannot be closed," Carter said. "When we left Camp David, I thought this day would come a lot earlier. It's long overdue. For the entire world, this is an extremely historic achievement

and a symbolic event."

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance and former missionary in Eastern Europe, likened the event to the toppling of the Berlin Wall.

"I had the same feeling when the Berlin Wall fell down," Lotz said, adding that Baptist leaders in Israel and Arab Baptists have been praying for this day for many years and they are rejoicing.

"The whole world was relieved when (Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak) Rabin and (PLO Chairman Yasser) Arafat shook hands," Lotz said.

Lotz said the BWA recently held a meeting in Cyprus with Middle Eastern Baptist leaders. At that time, they prayed for peace. Lotz said he was sure they were surprised at how quickly those prayers were answered.

He said the White House ceremony had a "biblical thrust to it" and said President Bill Clinton's use of Joshua and the fall of Jericho "was very symbolic of the whole nature of the problem."

Bill O'Brien of Birmingham, Ala., who serves on the steering committee of Evangelicals for Middle East Understanding, struggled to verbalize the feeling that swept over him as he watched the events unfold, but he said, "I was literally moved to tears."

After decades of bloodshed and hatred, the world witnessed the "birthing of hope," said O'Brien, director of the Global Center at Beeson Divinity School of Samford University and a 26-year veteran of Southern Baptist foreign missions.

"First of all, to me, it means a lot of people will experience the birth of hope for the first time. ... Even if the whole thing fell apart tomorrow, some things are worth doing for the moment."

However, O'Brien was quick to note that he is more optimistic than to believe the whole peace process can be derailed. As long as there are extremists on both sides who are whipping up hatred, O'Brien said, there will be setbacks, but he said he doubts the whole process is reversible.

Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, agreed.

"The process is going to be a long one," Sehested said. "There is plenty of room for lots of things to go wrong but for hopeful people, as Christians are called to be, a profound opening for a new future (has taken place).

"It's still going to take a lot of courageous, visionary people willing to take risks to produce something concrete out of this, but for the first time in half a century, we have the prospects, the opening, for some new forms of relationship among the Semitic peoples of the Middle East."

Charles Kimball, associate professor of religion at Furman University in Greenville, S.C., said the handshake between the two leaders was "the pivotal symbol that both sides had come over an enormous threshold. That is the key.

"At this point what has been agreed to is not a great deal," said Kimball, a Middle East expert and author. "But that the two sides have in fact come to this point and crossed this enormous barrier is quite important. It does signal that both sides are very serious now about negotiating a settlement. That degree of seriousness has not been there before."

Samford's O'Brien said that the event is a wonderful opportunity for Christians in the West to become acquainted with how they can learn from their brothers and sisters in the Middle East. He reminded Christians in the West that there are three times as many Christians in the Middle East as there are Jews in Israel.

"We have a large body of brothers and sisters in the Middle East who could benefit from an open heart and hand," he said, noting Westerners should project themselves into the situation as learners, not teachers.

O'Brien credited several factors for bringing about the historic

agreement. One factor, said O'Brien, is the demise of the Marxist ideology and the Soviet Union. That removed the constant tension between the two superpowers, a tension that added to Mideast polarization.

The work of former Secretary of State James Baker also was a contributing factor, O'Brien said. Baker was persistent and consistent in his negotiations, he said.

While there may be some reversals, O'Brien said there are signals on the horizon that the peace process can stay on track.

O'Brien reiterated that he hoped Western Christians would desire to be aware of God's working in the Middle East and that they would want to stand with those brothers and sisters as part of the solution.

Sehested added: "There is an enormous hopefulness. Isaiah predicts one day the desert will bloom. One of the first things that would have to happen (for the desert to bloom) is a dramatic climatic change.

"And what we are seeing is not yet the desert blooming but the climate changing in dramatic ways."

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Mideast peace offers little clue
to Second Coming, scholars agree

By Mark Wingfield

(ABP) -- While some radio and TV preachers may see ominous signs of the end times in the newly developing Middle East peace accord, most Baptist scholars don't see any direct relationship between current events and end-times prophecy.

Based on their differing views of how the end-times will unfold, however, those scholars do assign different degrees of importance to the Sept. 13 treaty-signing between Israel and the Palestinian Liberation Organization.

Christian views on the end times, or "eschatology," carry such ponderous labels as premillennialism and postmillennialism, referring to the 1000-year period of prophecy described in Revelation.

Those who describe themselves as premillennialists or premillennial dispensationalists are most likely to see some significance in the latest peace agreement. Those who are known as amillennialists see less significance.

"The most I would be willing to say about the present peace accords is that it may be something of a harbinger of millennial tranquility," said Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

Patterson is a "modified dispensationalist" who interprets biblical prophecy quite literally.

"I can't see how a careful dispensationalist would do more with it than this," he continued. "If Daniel 9 is taken literally, then eventually Israel will be exiled from the land again, and a temple built sometime between now and the time that exile takes place will be profaned again. Only by God's intervening protection will God's nation be saved at that time."

The peace Israel seeks now ultimately could impact its future unrest, Patterson said.

"There's usually a price involved in a making of peace. What Israel has done strategically is to make their land much less defensible."

But from a Christian perspective, the effort at peace "is always worthwhile," he added.

"Before the Second Coming of Christ, there will be a semblance of peace," said LaVerne Butler, president of Mid-Continent Baptist Bible College in Mayfield, Ky. I think we see all the movements in the Middle East as very, very critical,"

Like Patterson, Butler interprets biblical prophecy literally and believes Christ will return to earth before a period of great tribulation occurs; Christ's return will happen when all the "signs of the times" are in place.

But Butler sees current events in the Middle East as "just the continual moving of the checkers on the board until they all get into place."

"There are many things that may happen, and some things that must happen" before Christ's return, he said. "This is one of the things that may happen. There's not any biblical chapter and verse explanation of this single incident."

A similar opinion is shared by James DeLoach, who recently retired from the position of senior associate pastor at Second Baptist Church in Houston and moved to Alabama. DeLoach has been an ardent supporter of Israel and a spokesman for Israel's key role in end-times prophecy.

The peace accord is not the "zinger" some students of biblical prophecy would like to see it as, he said.

"From what I see in the prophetic Scriptures, I do not see Israel in peace in the last days. So I do not see this as some kind of ominous first step to the end times," he explained.

"But at same time I do not take great hope in it as far as the future of Israel is concerned. I see Israel in turmoil in the end times. God is the only ally Israel will have at that time."

Like Butler, DeLoach believes Jesus will return to claim his believers before the tribulation and millennium. "There are many things that are happening on the biblical scene that are indicators that the child of God should be looking up," he said, even if the peace accord is not one of them.

He cites Israel's re-establishment in its homeland and the many oppressions that have come as signs. "I also see that the United States itself, who has been Israel's friend, seems to be backing up from a strong commitment. Israel is becoming more and more friendless. It looks as though Israel has a lot of friends, but they are very tentative friends."

Others see the situation entirely differently.

"From the Christian viewpoint, we've got to be careful to keep a lid on these guys who say, 'Armageddon,'" said Wayne Ward, senior professor of Christian theology at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "Some are going to want to say maybe the millennium is coming."

But to identify the modern state of Israel with the Israel of prophecy is "outrageous," Ward said. "The designers of this state were socialists. ... The founding Zionists were all socialists, some of them card-carrying atheists."

Instead, the Israel referred to in New Testament prophecy "includes all who are believers by faith in the promise of God fulfilled in Jesus Christ," Ward said.

Therefore, what the modern nation of Israel does is not as important as others would make it out to be, he said.

Don Mantooth, who served as a foreign missionary in Israel, also does not see a connection between that nation and Christ's return.

"Whatever the end-times schedule is, it's in the hands of God," said

Mantooth, pastor of First Baptist Church in Morehead, Ky. "Regardless of whether there's peace in the Middle East, the Lord's going to come when he's going to come."

James Leo Garrett, professor of theology at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, also sees no connection.

"I see no special meaning related to end times" in the peace accord, he said, "although every movement of nations has relation to God's plan."

"Every movement toward peace among men and nations is something that can be seen as God's hand among mankind," Garrett said.

The peace accord "doesn't at all minimize our Christian responsibility to take the gospel to Arabs and Jews," he continued. "The fact that they're not shooting one another as much as before doesn't lessen the fact that they need to hear the gospel."

Regardless of their theological views on the end-times, the Baptist scholars interviewed for this article uniformly expressed joy at the prospects of peace in the Middle East.

"Having traveled to Israel for many, many years, and having many Jewish friends and many Arab friends, nothing personally gives me greater joy than to see at least this step having been made," DeLoach said. "... This is at least a movement that indicates somebody is thinking peace."

"From a Christian viewpoint, our friends and fellow Christians (in the Middle East) are going to have a chance to be a kind of bridge," Ward said. "It's been difficult for them. They've been attacked from both sides."

And the work ahead remains exceptionally difficult, he added.

"The work of building is much more demanding than the work of destruction. Satan is the destroyer, and God is the creator and builder. When you're on the side of restoring and building something, you're on the side of God. When you're on the side of destroying and throwing bombs, you're on the side of Satan."

And many crucial issues remain to be resolved, Chancellor noted James Chancellor, associate professor of Christian missions and world religions at Southern Seminary.

"The settlement that is being made by the PLO and Israel is essentially a political settlement over issues of sovereignty of the land, but does not address what is the really central religious issue in Palestine -- that is the religious status of Jerusalem.

"That's where the Islamic dimension comes into play rather significantly," he said. "The status of Jerusalem is not nearly as significant to the PLO as it would be to Muslims as a religious community. The PLO really is not a religiously oriented organization."

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Whose land is it anyway?

By Mark Wingfield

(ABP) -- While watching the endless news reports about the centuries-old struggle between Arabs and Jews for control of Palestine, American Christians may find themselves asking, "Whose land is it, anyway?"

The answer often depends on one's view of history and the Bible.

"The Palestinians were there before the Jews got there. But the claim of the Jews has been that 'God gave it to us,'" said James Heizer, history professor at Georgetown College in Georgetown, Ky.

The people who already were there -- including ancestors of modern-day

Palestinians -- did not recognize the Israelites' unique claim to the land, he added.

"It goes back to Abraham," Heizer explained, referring to the Old Testament character. Jews claim God gave the land to Abraham and therefore to them since they are the descendants of Abraham through Isaac. However, Palestinians also claim ancestry to Abraham through Ishmael.

Ishmael was Abraham's son by Hagar, the Egyptian maidservant of Abraham's wife, Sarah. This story is recorded in Genesis 16. God's promise to give Abraham and his descendants the land of Canaan is recorded throughout Genesis.

When Abraham's descendants finally arrived in Canaan, the Bible reports, there were other people already living there. They are identified in Numbers 13 as Amalekites, Hittites, Jebusites, Canaanites and Amorites.

Those names don't mean much in the struggle going on today, noted James Chancellor, associate professor of Christian missions and world religions at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. The key parts of the argument come from later periods of history.

Even in the glory years of Israel recorded in the Old Testament, the Israelites did not occupy the entire land, Heizer explained. "When Abraham's descendants moved there, they still lived in the hill country, not in the cities. ... Even David didn't rule all of Jerusalem."

Jewish sovereignty over territories in the Middle East ended about 75 A.D., Chancellor said.

Then the Middle East territories went through centuries of occupation, conquering rulers and realignments. There were the Assyrians, the Greeks, the Romans and the Turks, to name just a few.

By the first part of the 20th century, the British controlled much of the Middle East. Much of that land was occupied by Palestinians.

In 1947, through the United Nations, the British divided the land into independent Jewish and Arab states. The state of Israel was created on May 14, 1948.

"The people who were resident at that time, the Palestinians, never accepted the UN's authority to do that," Chancellor explained. "Many Palestinians were dispossessed in highly violent and highly unethical ways.

"Much of this really goes back to the British who promised the peoples of the Middle East self-determination in exchange for their support in the war against the Turks. At the same time the British also were promising the Zionist movement in Europe an eventual homeland for European Jews."

In 1967, Israel took control of additional territory, including the Golan Heights, Sinai Peninsula, Gaza Strip, West Bank and East Jerusalem.

Modern perspectives on who first had the land continue to differ.

"The Palestinians say, 'We were here first,'" Heizer explained. "'The fact that you (Israel) had a kingdom over here and you controlled the land for four or five centuries, does not give you the right to come back and control it in the middle of the 20th century.'"

But James DeLoach, a Baptist minister who has been active in support of Israel for decades, says he absolutely believes the Israeli claim to the land is superior because it is "the promise that God made to Abraham."

"God very specifically details and outlines the geographic boundaries," he said. "I believe the land biblically belongs to the nation of Israel."

The end times: four views

(ABP) -- Christian perspectives on the end times -- also known as "eschatology" -- generally fall into four categories.

In the introduction to his book, "The Meaning of the Millennium," published by InterVarsity Press, Robert Clouse summarizes these views. Here is a synopsis:

-- Premillennialists generally believe that the return of Christ will be preceded by certain signs such as the preaching of the gospel to all nations, a great apostasy, wars, famines, earthquakes, the appearance of the Antichrist and a great tribulation.

Christ's return will be followed by a period of peace and righteousness before the end of the world. Christ will reign as King in person or through a select group of followers. This reign will come about suddenly and with overwhelming power. The Jews will be converted and will play a key role in end-time events.

At the end of this period -- known as the millennium -- there will be a rebellion of the wicked which will almost overwhelm the believers. Some premillennialists believe that during this era the Christian dead will be raised to mingle freely with others on earth. After the millennium, the non-Christian dead will be raised and the eternal states of heaven and hell established.

-- Dispensational premillennialists hold a more specific understanding of the premillennialist view outlined above. Strict dispensationalists view world history in large periods of time known as "dispensations." They generally look for a secret rapture of Christians from the earth before the Great Tribulation. Afterward, Christ returns to establish his kingdom on earth. Dispensationalism bases its beliefs on a highly literal reading of Scripture.

-- Postmillennialists take a nearly opposite view to premillennialists. They believe that the kingdom of God is now being extended through Christian preaching and teaching. This activity will cause the world to be Christianized and result in a long period of peace and prosperity called the millennium.

The new age will not be essentially different from the current age, but will emerge as more of the world's population is converted to Christianity. This period closes with the Second Coming of Christ, the resurrection of the dead and the final judgment.

-- Amillennialists believe the Bible does not predict a period of universal peace and righteousness before the end of the world. They believe there will be a continuous growth of good and evil in the world which will culminate in the Second Coming of Christ when the dead shall be raised and the last judgment held.

Amillennialists hold that the kingdom of God is now present in the world as the victorious Christ is ruling his people by his Word and Spirit, although they look forward to a future, perfect kingdom on the new earth in the life to come. Amillennialists interpret the millennium mentioned in Revelation 20 as describing the current reign of the souls of deceased believers with Christ in heaven.

Former associate elected
editor of Georgia paper

ATLANTA (ABP) -- William Neal, director of student work for the Georgia Baptist Convention, has been elected editor of the Christian Index of Georgia, the oldest Southern Baptist newspaper.

Neal, former associate editor of the Index, was elected unanimously Sept. 14 by the Executive Committee of the Georgia Baptist Convention, which operates the 171-year-old weekly newspaper.

"I will do the best job I can to earn the trust of all Georgia Baptists," said Neal, "and to make our paper the kind of paper of which you'll be proud, and hopefully the best Baptist publication in the United States."

A 19-year employee of the state convention, Neal, 45, has spent most of his career in student work and Christian education, including 10 years as a Baptist campus minister for Columbus College, his alma mater, and two other colleges (1974-84).

After a four-year stint as associate editor for the Index, he became state student director in 1991.

The Index, which has a circulation of 62,000, has been without an editor since May, when Albert Mohler left to become president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Mohler, a conservative, served as editor from 1989 to 1993, succeeding long-time editor Jack Harwell, a moderate who was forced from the post due to the theological/political controversy in the Southern Baptist Convention.

Although Neal worked briefly with Harwell, he has not been identified with either faction in the controversy which has deeply divided Southern Baptists and the Georgia Baptist Convention.

His election came with the endorsement of both moderates and conservatives. James Merritt, pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville and the most outspoken conservative on the 10-member Index committee, said Neal had demonstrated himself to be a theological conservative.

Asked by members of the Executive Committee to describe his view of Scripture, Neal said the Bible is "truth without any mixture of error."

Neal, a native of Columbus, Ga., holds master of divinity and doctor of ministry degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, where he also worked as news director from 1972 to 1974.

Jack Lowndes, former interim editor of the Index who worked with Neal for 17 months, called the new editor "an excellent journalist."

"I found him to be completely fair in selecting news and writing articles, always using good judgment in the material he used," said Lowndes, now executive director of the Lord's Day Alliance in Atlanta. "Never have I known anyone with more integrity than Bill Neal."

Truett Gannon, Neal's pastor at Smoke Rise Baptist Church in Stone Mountain, Ga., and a former state convention president, described Neal as "a gifted writer, an excellent administrator, an ideal boss and supervisor."

Neal and his wife, Judith, have a teenage daughter, Mary Elizabeth.

Virginia church may be first
to grant pastor paternity leave

By Mike Clingenpeel

SCOTTSVILLE, Va. (ABP) -- Ask Mark King how he spent his summer vacation and he will proudly tell you -- on paternity leave.

King, pastor of Scottsville Baptist Church in Scottsville, Va., was granted paternity leave from mid-May to mid-August so he could be with his wife for the birth of their first child.

The historic church is one of the first, if not the first, in the Southern Baptist Convention to provide paternity leave for its pastor.

The leave was the result of the Kings' unique family circumstances.

For almost five years, Mark King has been pastor of the 150-member Scottsville congregation, which was the childhood church of Southern Baptist missions pioneer Lottie Moon. King's wife, Phyllis Lile-King, is an attorney serving a one-year appointment as a clerk for the United States Sixth Court of Appeals.

But while Scottsville is in central Virginia, the Court of Appeals is in Danville, Ky., 400 miles away.

King, 33, did not want to resign the Scottsville pastorate, his first. His wife did not feel she could turn down the coveted clerkship with the U.S. Court of Appeals. Her appointment did not end until August. Their baby was due in early July.

"It was a time of real turbulence deciding what to do," said Mark King. "I wanted to be with her before the baby and afterwards. I thought I was going to have to resign and leave. I felt it was best for me to be with Phyllis and the baby."

First he explained to the deacons his concerns, and they urged him to stay on as pastor.

When the issue was taken before the church council, one member suggested a paternity leave with half pay and full benefits. "When they said paternity leave, it totally surprised me," recalled King.

The church council and deacons finally presented to the congregation a recommendation for a three-month paternity leave.

Several members expressed concern that no minister would be available for crises. King assured them he would be in touch by phone and letter, and would return for emergencies and weddings. And an interim minister would be secured to preach in King's absence. The church voted unanimously to accept the idea.

King joined his wife in Danville, Ky., in mid-May. Each week he wrote a newsletter and mailed it to his church members in neighboring Virginia. Twice during the 12 weeks, he returned to Scottsville -- once to conduct the funeral of a church member and another time to perform a wedding renewal service for a couple in the church.

On June 22 Phyllis Lile-King gave birth to Rachel Elizabeth Lile-King at Central Baptist Hospital in Lexington, Ky. King returned to Scottsville in mid-August. His wife and daughter followed two weeks later.

The Kings evaluate the paternity leave as a success for both them and the church. During the summer several church members took the lead in ministry projects and deacons assumed responsibility for ministry to members. A service was held in late August to celebrate the work done by laity during King's leave.

"This moves them from an old model of ministry, where the pastor is care-giver, to new models of ministry," said King, assessing the value of the paternity leave for his church. "The deacons now feel they can do

things on their own."

He also is enthusiastic about the value for him and his wife: "It made Phyllis feel good. It validated her as a person. She is not just Mark's wife but a person in her own right."

"We're on the cutting edge of a new kind of pastor's family and new kind of pastor's spouse."

And they said they are grateful to Scottsville Baptist Church for being sensitive to their needs. "We have had a sense that God has taken care of us," Mark said.

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On fire for the Lord is good;
the Lord's house on fire isn't

By Mark Wingfield

BOWLING GREEN, Ky. (ABP) -- Church buildings might be places where people catch the fire of the Lord, but they shouldn't be places easily destroyed by earthly blazes, fire prevention experts say.

And Baptists who think they don't have to worry about the threat of fire should think again, adds a Kentucky pastor whose historic church building was destroyed by fire two years ago.

Those with an it-could-never-happen-here attitude are "kidding themselves and running a tremendous risk," said Richard Bridges, pastor of First Baptist Church in Bowling Green, Ky.

The Bowling Green congregation's 78-year-old sanctuary was destroyed by fire in October 1991.

"Don't wait for a remodeling project or a building project to bring your building up to code," Bridges advised. "The codes are costly and a lot of trouble, but the money you spend today will be pennies compared to what you'll spend tomorrow."

Arson is the leading cause of church fires, according to Pat Moreland, vice president with Church Mutual Insurance Co., the nation's largest insurer of church buildings.

Most often, arsonists strike churches as a means of vandalism or to cover up evidence of some other crime, Moreland said.

Faulty wiring is the second most common cause of church fires, he said. "Many church buildings are old, and in some instances a church building may predate the use of electricity. Consequently, the wiring in some older churches may not be adequate to handle the electrical demands of air conditioning, public-address systems, organs and other appliances and equipment found in churches today."

Other common causes of fires in churches include lightning strikes, faulty furnaces and stoves, overheated organ motors, carelessness with smoking materials and careless use of candles or Christmas decorations, Moreland said.

The age of many of the buildings and the perceived expense of making changes often work against fire prevention, said Carvon Hudson, assistant state fire marshal in Kentucky.

"If I had to recommend anything to the pastor and the congregation, it would be to protect your assets by installing an early-warning system or sprinkling," Hudson said.

"Don't let money determine the degree of safety you're willing to give your church," Pastor Bridges added. "Congregations ought to demand of their deacons, their staff, that they want their building safe."

Fire prevention is a matter of good stewardship, Bridges declared. Congregations must protect what God has given them and what Christians have sacrificed to build, he said.

The state fire marshall's office, or the fire prevention unit in each city or county, can help churches evaluate their fire-safety status.

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Tips for fire prevention

(ABP) -- Here's a summary of some commonly suggested fire-safety tips for churches:

-- Evaluate your church building's current status and determine how to correct deficiencies. A representative of the church's insurance company or of the local fire department could be enlisted to help.

-- Invest in a sprinkler system or fire-detection system. One of the reasons church fires often destroy entire buildings is that the fires are not detected until flames start leaping out windows. Since church buildings sometimes are vacant for days at a time, fire detection can be a major problem.

-- Make a monthly check of the building, looking for any obstructed exits, accumulations of debris or other fire hazards. Also ensure that fire-detection devices are functioning properly.

-- Keep flammable materials away from heat sources such as furnaces and stoves.

-- Make certain the church is using properly the fire-prevention devices it has. For example, if a fire door has been installed between two areas of the building, that door must remain closed or be equipped with an automatic closing device connected to the fire alarm.

-- Use only fire-resistant paper decorations for special events.

-- Do not cover more than 20 percent of any wall with children's artwork or teaching materials.

-- Avoid the use of open flames such as candles unless absolutely necessary. Fire prevention officials say candles remain the No. 1 problem area in their conversations with church leaders. A candlelight service, in which every person in the congregation is given a small candle to hold, is a recipe for disaster, they point out. A better alternative is to give candles only to a few responsible adults in the congregation or to use battery-operated flashlights that simulate candles.

-- Do not place a live Christmas tree in the church building. In fact, the use of live trees in church buildings is prohibited in some states.

-- Check the church organ frequently to make sure it is turned off when not in use. If left on, the overheated motor easily can start a fire.

-- Prohibit smoking inside church buildings.

-- Make sure the church has adequate insurance. A corollary to this is to make insurance selection a business decision rather than a means of doing a favor for a church member who sells insurance.

-- Keep an up-to-date inventory to prove value in case of loss. One way to do this is through videotaping the church premises and showing every item along with a descriptive narration.

-- Have a plan for evacuating the building in case of fire and post copies of that plan throughout the building.

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Tough topics attract
teens to church

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Do you want to know how to attract teenagers to church?

Host dialogues on some of life's toughest questions, advises pollster George Gallup Jr.

Results of a recent Gallup Youth Survey show teens ages 13-17 have a "great deal of interest" in discussing questions such as:

- "Is there really a God?" (64 percent)
- "What is the meaning of my life?" (56 percent)
- "Is there really a heaven or hell?" (55 percent)
- "Why is there so much evil and hatred in the world?" (50 percent)

Less than 20 percent of teens surveyed expressed little or no interest in discussing such questions.

Results of the poll are reported in the September issue of "Emerging Trends," the newsletter of the Princeton Religion Research Center.

Teenagers are most interested in discussing these difficult questions with people their own age, parents and church leaders, the poll found. They are least interested in discussing the questions with teachers and college professors.

Topics teens said they are least interested in exploring include how to become more religious and what it would be like to try another religion or church.

On a different front, the poll asked teens about their spending habits. Less than one third (32 percent) reported making a financial donation to a church in the past week.

Among those who made donations, the median amount was \$2 for teens ages 13-15 and \$8.50 for teens ages 16-17.

Black teens were more than twice as likely as white or Hispanic teens to have contributed -- and to have contributed more.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Senate panel eyes protection
for Native American religion

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Legislation protecting the religious rights of Native Americans -- including access to sacred sites and the religious use of peyote -- would not violate the First Amendment, three constitutional scholars told a Senate panel Sept. 10.

Rather than advancing religion, which is unconstitutional, the bill (S. 1021) simply would help remove governmental interference with religious practice, according to law professors Milner Ball of the University of Georgia School of Law, Michael McConnell of the University of Chicago School of Law, and Robert Clinton of the University of Iowa School of Law.

Indian tribes, Alaskan Natives and Native Hawaiians would be protected by the bill. In addition to its sacred site and peyote provisions, the bill would protect the religious rights of Native American prisoners and the religious use of eagles and other animals and plants.

"Most Americans take their right to religious freedom for granted, but

this right has been denied to many Native Americans," said Sen. Daniel Inouye, D-Hawaii, in a prepared statement read at a hearing before the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs.

"Their sacred sites have been desecrated, their religious practices are not well understood and their ceremonies were banned by government policy and federal law for scores of history," wrote Inouye, the bill's chief sponsor and chairman of the Indian Affairs panel.

During the hearing, the three law professors dismissed complaints that the proposed legislation would unconstitutionally favor Native American religions over other religions.

McConnell emphasized that this is not a case in which Congress is giving benefits to one religious group while withholding similar benefits from other groups. He predicted the courts would uphold the bill if enacted.

"Congress is in extremely strong position to enact this legislation," he said.

Clinton agreed, arguing that if Congress has the power to interfere with the religious practice of Native Americans, it also has the power to remediate the harm caused by its interference.

"I think the constitutionality of this act is hard to question," he said.

Ball, a Presbyterian minister, cited the government's long history of interference with Native American religious practice.

"The United States long sought to 'Christianize' Native Americans," he said. "It promoted Christianity in apparent violation of the establishment clause and suppressed Native American religion in apparent violation of the free-exercise clause."

All three professors cited the unique nature of the government's relationship with Native American religions, including its ownership of many outdoor sacred sites and the criminalization in some states of the sacramental use of the hallucinogen peyote -- a central element of worship in the Native American Church.

Government typically has carved out exemptions to accommodate religious practice, McConnell noted.

"When Congress enacted Prohibition, it incorporated an exception for sacramental wine," he said. "When it enacted military conscription, it included an exception for religious conscientious objectors."

For establishment-clause purposes, McConnell said, there is no difference between the use of peyote and sacramental wine.

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-- By Larry Chesser

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