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November 9, 1993

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Churches represent America's last
hope for 'community,' Moyers says

By Ken Camp

MARSHALL, Texas (ABP) -- Churches, like the East Texas Baptist congregation in which he grew up, are among the last places in America where a sense of community survives, veteran journalist Bill Moyers said.

Moyers, introduced by pastor W. Wallace Watkins simply as "Henry and Ruby Moyers' son," spoke Nov. 7 at the 50th anniversary service of Central Baptist Church, Marshall, Texas. The award-winning broadcaster reflected on American culture, faith and his own religious heritage.

"America has changed so much over these last 50 years," Moyers said. "Sometimes for the better; sometimes not. One of the casualties has been that sense of community which provided people with shared values and familiar landmarks."

"In some respects television has become our commons. But television is what someone else does for you," he said. "It happens without us, often in violence to our values. Lonely, suspicious and vulnerable, many Americans today take refuge in the comfortable lie rather than face the uncomfortable truth."

Too many Americans prefer the illusion of the entertainment media rather than the difficult reality of living and loving together in a shared community of faith, Moyers said.

"The truth, the uncomfortable truth ... is love -- God's love for us and our love for each other," he said. "I learned in this church that you never stand taller than when you're on your knees. And I learned in this church that you're never empty-handed when you stretch your hand out to someone else."

"That's why churches today for all their faults -- and God knows we have them -- are the last places in America, in many respects, where a sense of community still survives."

Moyers poignantly recounted personal memories of growing up in the East Texas congregation.

"This church is so much a part of my own story that I would not be able to explain myself to my year-old grandson without it," he said.

Looking back, Moyers said, he was reminded afresh of the lessons he learned -- particularly concerning the "stewardship of responsibility" of each generation to those who came before and those who follow.

"Being a Christian is an adventure in freedom within boundaries of accountability to God and to each other," he said.

"I learned about humanity in this church," he said. "I learned about frailty and forgiveness and fellowship."

Moyers recalled taking his "first baby steps in faith" at the church, and he told of the years in which he "squirmed ... prayed ... held hands and flirted with pretty girls ... (and) wrestled with hard questions" in the pews of Central Baptist Church.

"I learned about democracy in this church," he said, noting the equal voice of every member and the responsibility of leaders to "serve, not to rule" the congregation.

"I learned about the Bible here. It was the anchor of our beliefs, but it was no icon," he said. "Our pastors preached it as the Living Word whose revelation offers new insight in every age but requires our participation in its application."

Soul competency -- the privilege and responsibility of each individual to come to God through no intermediary except Jesus -- was central to the faith Central Baptist instilled in its members, Moyers said.

"Created with the imprint of divinity from the mixed clay of earth, you and I are endowed with the freedom and capacity to choose to be 'response-able' -- a grown-up before God. When God touched that clay, God touched our minds with the power to think and reason," he said.

"Truth is not some doctrinal proposition frozen like flavor in a Popsicle. Truth emerges from experience and encounter and sharing in a community of faith whose members struggle daily to love justice and mercy and to walk humbly with the Lord. Truth breathes life into tradition."

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Father of AIDS-affected family
offers echoes from the dark valley

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- When AIDS gripped Jimmy Allen's family, the former president of the Southern Baptist Convention saw his children and grandchildren rejected by a "dysfunctional family of faith."

But in walking through the valley of death's shadow, Allen said he learned from his family the importance of "loving past our differences" and clinging to God's abiding presence.

The long-time Baptist denominational executive shared "Echoes from the Valley of the Shadow: Reflections on the Church and AIDS" at a Christian ethics awards banquet sponsored by the T.B. Maston Foundation, Nov. 4 in Dallas.

Allen's living nightmare began eight years ago with a call from his son, Scott, in Colorado. Scott said his wife, Lydia, had contracted the

AIDS virus from a tainted blood transfusion during her first pregnancy and had passed it on to their two sons, Bryan and Matthew.

Scott, who was not HIV-positive, described his family's situation to leaders of the Disciples of Christ church where he served on staff. Within a week he was fired.

"That church failed. It was not to be our last experience like that," said the elder Allen, currently pastor of the Big Canoe Chapel in rural Georgia.

Devastated, Scott's family returned home to Texas, where 7-month-old Bryan died. In the months that followed, the Allens approached the pastors of several churches, explained their situation and asked if Matt could attend their Sunday school and worship services. They were turned away each time.

While some individual Christians offered tangible support to Lydia, Matt and Scott, the institutional church did not, Allen said.

"Risk-taking is difficult for individuals and virtually impossible for groups," Allen said.

Lydia Allen died in February 1992. Scott left the ministry, rejecting the church that rejected his family. He now works as a consultant on an AIDS-related project at the University of Texas Southwestern Medical School.

People with AIDS suffer the same isolation that lepers endured in biblical days, Allen said. But modern-day disciples of Jesus largely have failed to follow their Lord's example of ministering to society's untouchable members.

"The first man in history to reach out and voluntarily touch lepers didn't die of leprosy. He died at the hands of religious leaders who wouldn't have touched a leper on a bet," Allen said.

Part of the church's dilemma stems from the link between AIDS and homosexuality. That dilemma became personal for Allen with the realization that another son, Skip, was gay and with the news that he, too, was HIV-positive.

"Because I take the Bible seriously as the authority for life, there is no way I can discover to justify acting out homosexual behavior," Allen said. At the same time, he said, serious Christians must reconcile biblical prohibitions regarding homosexual acts with the abiding principles of God's loving mercy for people with those desires.

Choked with emotion, he described the pain felt by families of homosexuals, caught between the angry voices of preachers proclaiming AIDS as God's judgment upon Sodomites and the strident voices of gays seeking to justify their own behavior.

"Suffocating beneath the load of those hostile, angry encounters, suffering quietly in anguish and pain, are the parents and children of faith who are rejected and blamed because sons or daughters are having to cope with sexual desires for their own gender," Allen said.

Skip's struggle with his sexuality led him to substance abuse and suicide attempts, but through a 12-step recovery program he found wholeness.

"I discovered a new perception of the Scripture, 'He saved others. Himself he could not save.' I was part of the problem, and I could not effect the solution to it," Allen said. "He had to find it on his own."

Describing the agony of a father and son trying unsuccessfully to reach

toward each other across a chasm of differences, Allen said of his relationship with Skip, "Our differences of opinion were deep and continue to be so, but we love each other through them. I respect him. I love him. He's carving out a meaningful life in helping others. He loves God. And he's HIV-positive."

The challenge to individual Christians and to churches is to exercise the grace of God in human relationships, realizing that a person's behavior at a given time may have little to do with who he really is, Allen said.

"Judgmentalism is deadly to human relationships," he said. "But love goes past that to the heart of the matter. Persons are more than the sum of their parts. We move beyond theology to love."

Even in the midst of the dark valley, the Good Shepherd leads His flock toward refreshing green pastures, Allen testified. In his own walk, Allen said encouragement has come through the support of good friends, a realization that the church's response to people with AIDS has drastically improved in the last few years and a mystical awareness of God's presence.

Christians need to pray for a cure to AIDS, minister to people with AIDS and their families and work for prevention of the disease, he said.

Prevention is controversial, Allen said, "because so many object to condom education programs proposed as public policy, but there's no room for Christians to hide from the responsibility to work for the prevention of this death-dealing disease."

A "Christian strategy" is essential in AIDS prevention, Allen said. "If it's not to be condoms as a stop-gap while ethical ideals of persuasion to abstinence and away from promiscuous behavior take precedence, we will have to answer to God for what we have done. We must come up with something better."

At the Maston Foundation dinner, A. Jase Jones of Austin, Texas, received the biennial T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Award. He is former area director for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board's Interfaith Witness Department.

Jones was instrumental in creating the T.B. Maston Foundation to provide financial support for the study and application of Christian ethics and to honor the memory of Maston, who for more than 50 years taught Christian ethics at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, Fort Worth.

The foundation awarded four scholarships to graduate students in Christian ethics at Southwestern Seminary. Recipients were Barbara Jean Bell, Rob Blackaby, Mark Elder and Kevin S. Key.

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Supreme Court rejects dispute
over religious hiring preference

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A pair of private schools in Hawaii have lost their bid to continue a policy of hiring only Protestant teachers.

The U.S. Supreme Court refused Nov. 8 to review a lower court's conclusion that the Kamehameha Schools do not qualify for an exemption to a federal ban on religious discrimination in hiring.

Kamehameha Schools, one for boys and one for girls, were created by

the estate of a member of the Hawaiian royal family. The will of Bernice Pauahi Bishop, who died in 1884, directed that teachers at the schools be Protestants.

The policy was challenged by a non-Protestant who sought a job as a substitute French teacher.

A federal district court sided with Kamehameha officials, holding that the schools qualified for all three exemptions Congress provided to legislation barring discrimination in hiring.

Those exemptions allow hiring based on religion for a religious educational institution, when religion is a bona fide occupational qualification necessary to the operation of a particular institution and when the curriculum of a school is directed toward the propagation of a particular religion.

A federal appeals court, however, ruled against the schools.

The appeals court said the schools' ownership and affiliation, purpose, faculty, student body, student activities and curriculum "are either essentially secular, or neutral as far as religion is concerned."

The court said that "the general picture of the Schools reflects a primarily secular rather than a primarily religious orientation."

Among the reasons for its conclusions, the appeals court noted that no religious organization has ever controlled or supported the schools, which are not affiliated with any denomination or association of religious schools.

The court also said that only three of the schools' 250 full-time, on-campus faculty members have specific religious teaching duties and that less than one-third of the students are Protestants.

In addition, the court said the schools' curriculum was not directed toward the propagation of a specific faith.

Several religious groups concerned about the impact of the appeals court's ruling, including the Southern Baptist Convention Christian Life Commission, asked the high court to review the case.

In a "friend-of-the-court" brief written primarily by Dean Edward McGlynn Gaffney Jr. of Valparaiso University School of Law, the religious organizations warned that the federal appeals court's narrow interpretation of the exemptions "will have a severe impact on literally thousands of religious institutions throughout the nation. All of these institutions stand to lose a large measure of their control over their own hiring policies."

The brief argued that religious schools and educational organizations must be free to make employment decisions based on religious preference to preserve their religious mission.

"Congress surely did not intend to stifle the ability of the thousands of independent, self-supporting religious schools and colleges to undertake their educational mission with a distinctively religious flavor," the brief stated.

In addition to the CLC, signers of the brief include the Christian Legal Society, Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, Christian College Coalition, Episcopal Church in Hawaii, National Association of Evangelicals, University of Notre Dame and Valparaiso University.

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