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Clinton challenges Americans  
to continue 'journey of renewal'

By Pam Parry

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- For America to continue its "journey of renewal," government, communities, churches, families and individuals must all do their parts, President Clinton said Jan. 25 in his first State of the Union address.

"Our problems go way beyond the reach of government," Clinton told a joint session of Congress. "They're rooted in the loss of values and the disappearance of work and the breakdown of our families and our communities."

In his inaugural address, Clinton challenged Americans to accept responsibility for the country's future. A year later, he thanked members of Congress for the progress that has been made.

"We replaced drift and deadlock with renewal and reform," he said. "And I want to thank everyone of you here who heard the American people, who broke gridlock, who gave them the most successful teamwork between a president and a Congress in 30 years."

"Though we are making a difference," Clinton said, "our work has just begun."

The president called for renewal that would translate into reform of welfare and health care, tougher crime laws, restrictions on campaign finance and lobbying activities, as well as initiatives for improving America's schools. In each instance, he cited rebuilding the American family as a key factor.

He emphasized that restoring the family structure will require individual responsibility and commitment.

"People who bring children into this world cannot and must not walk away from them," he said.

"The American people have got to want to change from within if we're going to bring back work and family and community. We cannot renew our country when, within a decade, more than half of the children will be born

into families where there has been no marriage.

"We cannot renew this country when 13-year-old boys get semiautomatic weapons to shoot 9-year-olds for kicks. We can't renew our country when children are having children and the fathers walk away as if the kids don't amount to anything."

Clinton credited activist American Baptist minister Tony Campolo as a role model for national renewal. Campolo, a popular speaker and author, teaches at Eastern College, an American Baptist school in St. Davids, Pa.

Americans must realize that "governments don't raise children; parents do," Clinton said.

"Let's give our children a future. Let us take away their guns and give them books. Let us overcome their despair and replace it with hope. Let us, by our example, teach them to obey the law, respect our neighbors, and cherish our values. Let us weave these sturdy threads into a new American community that once more stands strong against the forces of despair and evil because everybody has a chance to walk into a better tomorrow."

Some "naysayers" will fear that Americans are not up to the challenge, but they misread both the nation's heritage and history and today's headlines, Clinton said. When natural disasters struck in California and Missouri, the American people came together.

"They rose to the occasion, neighbor helping neighbor, strangers risking life and limb to save total strangers, showing the better angels of our nature."

"Let us not reserve the better angels only for natural disasters, leaving our deepest and most profound problems to petty political fighting. Let us instead be true to our spirit, facing facts, coming together, bringing hope and moving forward."

As America takes these steps toward renewal at home, Clinton urged the nation to renew its leadership abroad. Because of the agreements made this year, he said, "Russia's strategic nuclear missiles soon will no longer be pointed at the United States. Nor will we point ours at them."

Acknowledging danger still exists across the globe, Clinton said his recent trip to Europe helped to create a "partnership of peace."

"Tonight, my fellow Americans, we are summoned to answer a question as old as the republic itself, what is the state of our union? It is growing stronger but it must be stronger still. With your help and God's help it will be."

Following the president's remarks, Senate Minority Leader Bob Dole of Kansas offered the official Republican response.

Dole strongly criticized the administration's health-care plan. He also said the president took strong stances on several issues, such as crime, but questioned whether or not the president would follow through with them.

"Now, many people are confused when the president's actions appear different than his words. For example, the president talks about education. But he opposes school choice, which could give parents more control over the education of their children."

Clinton did endorse "public school choice" in his address, but he has opposed private school choice proposals touted by many Republicans.

"It is up to us," Dole added, "to ensure that, wherever the road divides, America takes the right path -- remains true to its mission of leadership, and remains the light and the hope of humanity."

Church-state partnership can help  
solve health crisis, Elders says

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Surgeon General Joycelyn Elders called for a partnership between churches and government to address America's health-care crisis.

"We've always talked about separation of church and state," she told a conference of religious leaders and public-health officials Jan. 25. "I want us to talk about the integration of church and state. Let us begin to integrate those things that we each do well, put them together and begin to make things happen."

The three-day conference, at the Carter Center in Atlanta, was sponsored by the center's Interfaith Health Program, which is promoting cooperation between faith groups and public and private health-care providers. About half a dozen Southern Baptists were among the 125-plus participants.

"We in the public-health community need what you've got," Elders told the interfaith leaders, many of whom are involved in model health-care programs around the country.

The power of local congregations and other religious groups to impact community actions and attitudes is an asset to the government, she said. "We've got a lot of scientific knowledge and know-how. We need your superhighway so we can get where we need to be to reach all of our people.

"This conference, I feel, will be the turning point for improving health in our country," she said.

Elders' invitation for church-state cooperation on health care echoed the words of former president Jimmy Carter, who told conference participants a day earlier that faith groups can fill in some of the health-care gaps left when the Clinton administration's ambitious reform package is inevitably scaled back.

"I think it couldn't be a more propitious time for all of you to be involved," he told the interfaith group.

While congregations can do little in the way of health-care treatment, he said, they can make a major impact in disease prevention, education and advocacy. He praised those groups who are already involved, noting that 73 percent of mainline congregations have at least one health-related ministry.

In preparation for the Atlanta conference, the Carter Center conducted a study of church-related health programs in nine U.S. cities. The study highlighted several successful models for cooperation, including church-to-church collaboration, churches working with public-health agencies, and school-church-agency collaborations.

Yet the health programs of faith groups fall short in several ways, the report concluded. Among the weaknesses:

-- Much know-how is not applied. For instance, Americans have not applied what they know about the dangers and cures of hunger, tobacco-caused diseases and handgun violence.

-- Much belief is not followed by action. Faith groups do not act on their shared beliefs, such as the common commitment to alleviate human suffering.

-- Many good models are not shared. "We have come to believe that nearly everything that ought to be done is being done somewhere by a church, synagogue, mosque or temple," the report said, but those model programs are not replicated elsewhere.

-- Much isolation exists. Congregations work apart from each other and

from public-health agencies that could help.

-- Much action is near-sighted. Some solutions to health problems will take generations to solve.

The three-day conference focused more on sharing strategies than evaluating specific proposals for health-care reform. But organizers said there was another objective for bringing together religious leaders to discuss health care -- namely to make sure the health-reform debate becomes a moral debate as well.

"So far the debate has been overfocused on who is paying for what services," said Gary Gunderson of the Carter Center. "It has not been engaged as a moral issue. I think that's a tragedy."

All the faith groups that participated in the conference -- Protestant, Catholic, Jewish and Moslem -- share a spiritual commitment to alleviate human suffering, said Gunderson, director of operations for the Interfaith Health Program and a member of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Atlanta.

Participants heard sometimes heart-rending accounts of how poverty, prejudice and other social ills keep people from receiving health care, Gunderson noted. "The deepest sign of pathology in our churches is that we can sit in these discussions passively."

While many religious groups see a moral element in the health-care debate, they don't all agree on which moral issues should take precedence.

A week before the Carter Center meeting, the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission issued a statement detailing which issues will guide that agency's evaluation of upcoming health-reform proposals.

Topping their list of concerns was abortion. Under Clinton's health-reform package, "the killing of unborn children will vastly multiply," the CLC said. Moreover, the use of government money for abortions would violate the religious liberty of pro-life taxpayers, the agency said.

"We will resist any plan which will fund abortion counseling, contraceptive distribution to minors, medical care without parental consent, and school-based clinics which facilitate these activities," the CLC statement said.

And, the statement added, most Southern Baptists and most Americans "may be worse off under the Clinton blueprint."

Gunderson acknowledged that many people of faith will "part company" on specific health-reform issues, such as abortion funding, euthanasia, condom distribution and sex education. "It is an insult to say that our religious differences aren't meaningful," he told ABP.

But, he said, those differences should not prevent various faiths from cooperating on those broad issues where there is agreement -- what Gunderson calls "limited-domain collaboration."

As an example, Gunderson noted the participation of Roman Catholics, also staunch abortion opponents, in the Carter Center conference.

Surgeon General Elders, an abortion-rights advocate, has been a lightning rod for criticism because of her support for condom distribution and school-based family planning clinics.

She told conference participants her controversial views are justified because of the crisis of teen pregnancy. "A crisis requires crisis intervention," said Elders, the government's highest-ranking public-health official.

She called on faith groups to back her up.

"I don't mind being in Washington being your lightning rod, but I want all of you out in the community being my thunder," she said.

A Clinton appointee, Elders defended the president's health-reform plan, as well as the right of every American to health care. "... Every criminal has a right to a lawyer. Why shouldn't every sick person have a right to a

doctor?"

She said government spending does not reflect a priority on the health of citizens.

While the government spends an average of \$33 million an hour on national defense, \$23 million an hour to pay off the national debt, and \$8.7 million an hour on the savings and loan bailout, she said, only \$1.3 million an hour is spent on the needs of children.

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SBC leader says his church  
will appeal court's ruling

SANFORD, Fla. (ABP) -- A Lake Mary, Fla., church ordered by a judge to open its books to a former member will appeal the ruling, its pastor says.

Seminole County Circuit Judge Newman Brock ruled Jan. 18 that Ann Haynes was improperly excluded from membership of the First Baptist Church of Markham Woods and ordered she be given access to church financial records.

The church's pastor, Bob Parker, a member of the Southern Baptist Convention executive committee, did not return calls from Associated Baptist Press for a story about the decision released Jan. 20. However, he told Baptist Press Jan. 26 that the church plans to appeal the ruling on First Amendment grounds.

The church argued unsuccessfully at a Dec. 20 hearing that the court had no jurisdiction in what it characterized as an ecclesiastical dispute.

However, Judge Brock responded that since the church is non-profit corporation registered in the state of Florida, it lies within the court's interest to oblige the congregation to abide by its articles of incorporation.

Haynes said she wants to inspect church financial records to determine if a \$416,334 bequest was deposited properly, if Parker has improperly obtained tax-free loans to build a home and whether the church held a deed to Parker's property to shelter him from paying taxes.

She sought to examine the books last Aug. 17, and was told by Parker she was no longer a church member. Citing an addendum to the church's constitution giving the deacons authority to determine membership in cases of non-attendance, two of the church's three deacons voted her out of membership at an Aug. 4 meeting. The deacons charged her with unfaithful attendance, unchristian conduct and unwillingness to sincerely resolve concerns with other church members.

Haynes filed a suit Aug. 27 claiming that the church's articles of incorporation require that exclusion of members be done by vote of the congregation at a "regular church meeting."

The church did subsequently meet and endorse the deacons' vote, on Aug. 18. Haynes charged that meeting was called without proper notification.

Brock sided with Haynes, ruling that her initial request to view church documents was valid. He ordered the church to allow her to inspect the records and to pay court costs, including her attorney fees.

Parker told Baptist Press he believes the case stands a good chance of being overturned, because appeals courts sometimes understand more clearly that church disputes are not the province of the judicial system.

ABP again sought to reach Parker on Jan. 27 and was told he was not at the church and was unavailable for comment.

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-- By Bob Allen

Richmond seminary  
receives record gift

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- An anonymous \$100,000 donation made to the Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond is the largest cash gift to date from an individual, according to Beth McMahan, public relations director for the school.

The gift will establish two endowments. One will benefit the seminary's program of training students through supervised hand-on ministries in local churches. The other is for the Baptist center for women, an auxiliary to the seminary established in 1992 to support women in ministry.

The remainder of the gift will go to the seminary's general fund.

The donation honors the Alliance of Baptists, the organization which began the independent Baptist seminary in Richmond, Va., in 1989.

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Theologians, laity wonder  
about God's role in tragedy

By Bob Allen

(ABP) -- Could God have prevented Los Angeles' killer earthquake? If so, and God is good, why did it happen?

Or did God send the Jan. 17 earthquake, killing 55 and leaving 20,000 homeless, in judgment of licentiousness associated with the Hollywood lifestyle?

Religious people have been debating those kinds of questions at least since the time of Job. And still, only God knows.

"These questions are very difficult for theologians, but even more difficult for the people in the pew to deal with," says David Dockery, dean of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary's school of theology.

Regardless of their perspective, theologians find God's hand in natural disasters.

"I do think these natural disasters have a way of getting our attention -- to let us know there is someone else in control of life's situations above and beyond ourselves," says Dockery.

Does that mean God causes human suffering?

"I think it's better to see God having an overall redemptive plan in which he is moving history along in accord with his providential destiny," says Dockery. "He uses these events rather than he causes these events."

A leader in a movement among Southern Baptists praying for spiritual awakening sees God's hand more directly in some disasters.

The Bible teaches that God causes natural disasters to call people to repentance, says Avery Willis, senior vice president for overseas at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board. "That is the bottom line. I can say that unequivocally."

Willis believes the earthquake carries a message from God. "It's a strong possibility that God is trying to wake us up," he says.

Like other natural disasters, the Los Angeles earthquake is "a disciplinary warning" to America, Willis says.

Dockery cautions against the urge to label every tragedy as God's wrath.

"I think it's possible that God can use these events as an aspect of his judgment," Dockery says. However, he adds, "I think we need to have a great deal of discernment before we pronounce them as such."

"Within God's purposes he may use these as judgment upon corporate sins

as a way of getting us to recognize he can bring life to a halt," he says. "We have to realize we are not in control of our own destiny."

Keith Putt, associate professor of philosophy of religion at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary, is even more reluctant to attribute tragedy to God. God ultimately accepts the responsibility for the earthquake, Putt says, "because God created everything in which this took place."

However, he adds, "That's different than saying God willed this earthquake."

The real question, Putt says, is "not whether God is to blame for the earthquake, but could God have stopped this? Could God have intervened?"

"I can't answer that," he acknowledges.

Even Romans 8:28, a favorite verse for consolation, leaves open the question of why people suffer.

"It says that God works all things for good," says Putt. "God can take care of all things and make them good. It doesn't mean all things are good, but God can bring even good from what is not good."

The "all things" to come down the pike in the U.S. recently certainly raise questions. The list of disasters rings apocalyptic.

Even before the California quake, the eastern two-thirds of the U.S. was gripped by an unprecedented cold wave which shut down major cities and claimed more than 130 lives.

Last summer's flooding in the Midwest was described by river watchers as a 500-year flood, wiping out entire towns and ravaging an economy heavily dependent on agriculture.

Last year's brush fires raged through Southern California, destroying 1,000 homes in some of America's richest enclaves. In some of the poorest sections, 1992's L.A. riots killed 57 and did another \$1 billion in damage.

The frequency of disasters is even more telling than their magnitude, Willis says.

"Any time you're trying to pin one disaster and say, 'This is the hand of God,' it's open to interpretation. We need to look at the cumulative evidence," Willis says. He mentioned one accounting that numbers 120 national disasters in the last year.

People affected by tragedies often testify that God uses such experiences to teach valuable lessons. To different individuals, however, God says different things.

Lesley Williams is a disaster veteran, one of the estimated 350,000 South Floridians left homeless in the aftermath of September 1992's Hurricane Andrew. Williams, minister of education at a Miami church, and his family were displaced for 10-and-a-half months. During that time, Williams said his 14-year-old son's grade average dropped a full point.

Williams said he tried to maintain a positive attitude. "I looked at it like Job," he said. "I knew God would pull us through and make it better."

He said his wife, however, couldn't help but wonder as she saw homes in the neighborhood that were spared while theirs was a total loss, "why the heathens were saved and we suffered."

Robert Parham, director of the Baptist Center for Ethics, warns against the "prideful belief that Christians are immune from suffering that results from natural disasters."

"Every human being everywhere faces the threat of natural disaster such as tornados, droughts, floods, hurricanes and earthquakes," Parham says. "We cannot completely safeguard ourselves from natural disasters. Buildings built by Christians collapse as quickly in earthquakes as buildings constructed by non-Christians."

In fact, Parham says, ethical thinking "requires that we tell the truth

about natural disasters."

Flooding in Bangladesh, Parham said, is often reported as an act of God. However, it often results from deforestation in the Himalayas, removing a natural barrier against flooding.

"Many natural disasters are really man-made disasters," Parham says.

Putt agrees that in some cases, the victims themselves share the blame. "If you know you're building your house on an earthquake fault and you choose to do that, and if an earthquake destroys your house, then you must accept responsibility."

Paulette Adams, another Hurricane Andrew victim, acknowledges that risk. "We never wondered 'why us?' I live in Miami. I live in Florida where hurricanes are part of the weather pattern. But we never expected it to be this bad."

Still, she confessed, "all we lost were possessions." She considers it a blessing that while most members of her church lost their homes, only two people were injured.

Even when God uses disasters to do his will, not everyone affected is subject to divine judgment, Willis says. Any time there is a disaster, "a lot of innocent people are hurt," he says.

Willis also believes God's judgment is ultimately redemptive. Disasters strike "not just because God is angry but because he loves us and wants to bring us back to him," he says.

Putt says victims of disasters do not suffer alone. God, he says, participates with them in their suffering.

"God suffers when humanity suffers," Putt says. God loves all humanity, and suffers for disaster victims in the way a parent grieves for a lost child, he adds.

"God loves us so intimately that he suffers with all his creation," Putt says.

Putt views God's participation in suffering of his creation as evidence of redemptive love.

One way that love is manifested is through redemptive acts of charity done in Jesus' name.

"I think it's important that the church recognize that out of these events we need to bring a word of comfort from God," Dockery says.

People in the aftermath of disaster "don't want simple answers as to why this happened," Putt says. "They just want someone to care."

William Tillman, associate professor of Christian ethics at Southwestern Seminary, says Christians are mandated to minister to all "the shadow people -- people on the edges of society who have been pushed there by crises."

"This is a moment to exhibit the very best of what it means to witness to the Christian faith," Tillman says. "But it should be out of a true sense of reaching out to human beings in need and not out of a motive for cheap evangelism."

People staffing Southern Baptist disaster relief units dispatched to California "exhibit the very best of what it means to live under the gospel," Tillman says, "that wherever there is pain and hurt, we should be there as Christians to offer healing."

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-- Scott Collins, Barbara Denman and Greg Warner contributed to this story.

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