

Associated Baptist Press

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In this issue:

- Baptists, others, cope and respond to floods spawned by tropical storm
- North Carolina executive director reacts to upcoming HMB study
- Southwestern search committee officially announces its recommendation
- 'Rites of Passage' aid transition into adulthood for black youth

Baptists, others, cope and respond to floods spawned by tropical storm

By Bob Allen

AMERICUS, Ga. (ABP) -- Residents of Koinonia Partners, an experimental Christian community founded in 1969 by Southern Baptist seminary professor Clarence Jordan, mourned the loss of a long-time resident drowned July 5 in a flash flood spawned by remnants of Tropical Storm Alberto.

Jophie Anderson, 70, was one of at least 28 people killed in southwest Georgia by flooding caused by four days of unrelenting rains starting July 5. In Americus, located in Sumter County, the hardest-hit of the 43 counties in the state to have been declared either a disaster area or in a state of emergency, 21 inches of rain fell in one 24-hour period.

About 175,000 people have been displaced by the floods in Georgia, and about 300,000 acres of crops are underwater, causing agricultural losses expected to reach \$100 million.

Anderson, like many of the flood fatalities, died while trying to drive through floodwaters in low-lying areas. She drowned when waters swept her car off Georgia Highway 49 into a rain-swollen ditch about three miles south of Americus. She was returning home after taking her foster child to Florida.

At a memorial service July 11, the Koinonia Partners community eulogized Anderson, a past activities coordinator, as "a demonstration of walking theology," said the organization's executive director, Fer-Rell Malone. "She was a doer and affected the lives of many people in the community by her sharing and her love," he said. "She will be greatly missed."

More than 50 Koinonia homes in various locations in Sumter County received flood damage, Malone said. Koinonia also suffered damage to crops, which underwrite the living expenses and ministry programs for the ecumenical Christian communal farm, and to the organization's irrigation system, he added.

"We expect some very serious financial problems," Malone said. He said Koinonia supporters will be asked to contribute to the organization's Fund for Humanity to repair and replace flood damage. Contributions may be sent to Koinonia Partners, 1324 Georgia Highway South, Americus, Ga., 31709, he said.

Another ecumenical Christian organization based in Americus, Habitat for Humanity, International, escaped damage but turned to responding to needs of others less fortunate.

None of the 140 Habitat homes located in Sumter County was thought to be damaged, said Jim Perks, a staff member for the non-profit organization which provides affordable housing and low-interest loans to qualifying needy people by utilizing volunteer labor, donated materials and "sweat equity" by homeowners. Many Baptists, including former President Jimmy Carter, support and work with Habitat.

Habitat's staff left normal tasks to focus on community relief, Perks said, including manning a switchboard and delivering drinking water to several neighborhoods. One church group that arrived expecting to work on home construction instead wound up carrying water to flush toilets at a hospital with no running water.

Water service was restored by July 12, said Comer Williamson, director of missions for Friendship Baptist Association in Americus. He said he and pastors in the association were participating in a relief effort coordinated by the American Red Cross, mainly assessing damage so as work crews arrive they can be dispatched most efficiently.

Floodwaters have receded within the boundaries of Americus, a city of 21,000 located 70 miles southwest of Macon, Williamson said. "Everything in Americus could be cleaned up right now," he said.

Assessing damage in outlying areas is not as far along, however. Friendship Association includes 43 churches spread across seven counties and reports of damage have been sketchy, he said.

While Americus is accessible to the outside, detours around closed roads make travel time-consuming, Williamson said. He related talking to one person who said he drove 90 miles to complete a journey that is normally seven miles.

One church, Whitewater Baptist Church near Oglethorpe, reportedly had eight-to-10 feet of water in its sanctuary from flooded Whitewater Creek. Damage is expected to exceed \$100,000-plus for the sanctuary and an adjoining parsonage may be a total loss, he said. The church is fairly large for the association, averaging about 120 in Sunday school, Williamson said.

Farther south, residents of Georgia and the Florida Panhandle braced for the worst.

The 25,000 residents of Bainbridge awaited the anticipated crest of the Flint River sometime Thursday, July 14, which is expected to rise 20 feet above flood stage and five feet higher than the worst flood on record.

Already, about 5,000 people have been evacuated from Bainbridge, said Charles Holland, director of missions for Bowen Baptist Association, as waters poured into low-lying sections. "We have many families that are totally wiped out," Holland said. "They won't even have a home to go back to once this is over."

The association's Brotherhood has set up distribution centers for food, medicine, diapers, baby food and formula and drinking water. "Water is a big commodity," Holland said. A tractor-trailer load of food and supplies was reported July 12 to be en route to Bainbridge from the Georgia Baptist Convention's state Brotherhood, he said.

No flood-related deaths were reported in the Bainbridge area, because people had adequate time to take precautions, Holland said. But anticipation gripped the community as citizens awaited the brunt of rising waters.

"The critical time is going to be Thursday, when the high water hits," Holland said. "It will definitely hit areas that we have not had problems with in the past."

The Georgia Brotherhood office is accepting financial donations and asking for churches to contribute cleaning supplies through pickup sites coordinated by associations, said Vickie Norwood at the state convention's office in Atlanta. The office is also compiling information from potential volunteers to be used in coordinating cleanup efforts, she said.

Feeding units from the Georgia Brotherhood are serving in Perry, Cordele and Albany, according to Kenny Rains, national off-site disaster-relief coordinator for the Southern Baptist Convention Brotherhood Commission.

A Brotherhood-staffed vehicle from South Carolina is serving meals in Moultrie, Ga., and shelters and kitchens are open at Baptist churches in Camilla, Bainbridge and Albany, he said.

An Alabama state Brotherhood's disaster relief unit serves meals at First Baptist Church, Enterprise, Ala., also hit hard by flooding. At least eight Alabama counties have been declared disaster areas.

Another unit from western Florida set up a feeding station in Bonifay near the flooding Choctawhatchee River. Another Florida Baptist unit began serving meals at Blue Springs Baptist Assembly in Marianna.

Seventeen Florida counties are declared either disaster areas or in a state of emergency.

Farther north in Georgia, flooding knocked out water service in Macon, closing numerous businesses. Mercer University, a Baptist school, closed its Macon campus three days, July 6-8. The school re-opened July 11, said spokesman Larry Brunley, but expected to remain without water for at least another week. Portable toilets have been moved in. Some buildings are without air conditioning, he said, because they use a water-cooled system, he said.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship has allocated \$25,000 for flood relief to be coordinated by the Georgia state Fellowship, according to David Wilkinson, communications coordinator for the Atlanta-based organization.

-30-

North Carolina executive director reacts to upcoming HMB study

CARY, N.C. (ABP) -- Any attempt by the Southern Baptist Convention's Home Mission Board to refuse funding to Baptist state conventions which send money to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship would generate an "immediate and direct" response from North Carolina, predicted the state's executive director-treasurer.

The Home Mission Board's executive committee voted June 13 to establish a committee to study the agency's relationship with state conventions that carry out instructions from contributing churches to disburse gifts to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in addition to or instead of the denomination's traditional unified budget plan, the Cooperative Program.

The Fellowship is a four-year-old organization of moderates at odds with the SBC's fundamental-conservative leadership. At its recent annual meeting, the SBC voted to instruct its agencies to no longer accept missions gifts channeled through the Fellowship's Atlanta offices.

But even before that vote, the HMB's executive committee narrowly approved a motion by Greg Martin of Long Beach, Miss., to consider changing ways the board relates to state conventions which serve as "brokerage firms" for the Fellowship.

"I think we need to rethink how we do missions in states that refuse to be loyal to Southern Baptists," said Martin. "Should we be in partnership with them in the present way?"

Baptist State Convention of North Carolina executive Roy Smith responded in the July 2 Biblical Recorder, the state convention's news journal. "The 'C' in CP stands for cooperation, not control," a front-page story quoted Smith.

"Any action changing the way the SBC Home Mission Board funds projects in North Carolina because the state convention channels designated funds to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship will generate an immediate and direct response from Tar Heel Baptists," Smith said.

"Cooperative Program dollars don't grow on trees in Atlanta, Nashville, Cary or anywhere else," Smith continued. "The Home Mission Board does not dictate to the state convention, nor the state convention to the churches. If I understand freedom-loving North Carolina Baptists at all, we respond to cooperation, not to threats or mandates."

The Cooperative Program is credited with the rapid growth which over decades established the 15.4-million-member SBC as the nation's second-largest religious group. Established in 1925, the plan elicits voluntary support from churches to fund simultaneously their respective state convention and the SBC -- autonomous entities both subject to ecclesiastical control only by the local church.

Churches using the Cooperative Program determine what portion, if any, of their offerings will be set aside for missions through the plan. Messengers from those churches attend state convention meetings to determine what percentage of those funds remain in their state and how much goes to the SBC. Finally, SBC messengers adopt a

budget allocating those funds to the various national boards and agencies supported by the convention.

In turn, the SBC's Home Mission Board sends money back to the states in cooperative agreements with the state conventions, primarily for salary supplements for mission pastors and ministry projects in Baptist associations.

In North Carolina, last year Baptists sent more than \$5.3 million to the Home Mission Board through the Cooperative Program and the Annie Armstrong Offering designated for home missions and received \$475,000 in grants from the HMB.

North Carolina Baptists are prepared to reallocate missions gifts to take up any slack caused by a drop in HMB funding, Smith said. "We will continue home missions in North Carolina, with or without the Home Mission Board."

In areas where Southern Baptist work is less established, however, the balance shifts. Some smaller state conventions receive more money from the Home Mission Board than they contribute to its work. Most of the Fellowship's support, however, comes from the larger states.

Twelve state conventions allow churches to channel funds through their offices to the Fellowship, according to a Fellowship staff member.

-30-

-- By Bob Allen

Southwestern search committee officially announces its recommendation

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) — A search committee recommending a new president at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary has officially acknowledged their choice for the job is Ken Hemphill.

A press release issued July 12 by the Fort Worth, Texas,-based seminary quoted Miles Seaborn, chairman of the presidential search committee, as announcing that Hemphill will be nominated to the 40-member board of trustees at a called meeting July 28. (Note to editors: Earlier reports dated the meeting July 29.)

Hemphill, 46, would replace Russell Dilday, the seminary's president for nearly 15 years before he was fired from the post March 9 because of incompatibility with trustees who complained he resisted reforms mandated by the "conservative resurgence" in the nation's largest non-Catholic religious body.

Seaborn, pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, described Hemphill as "a peacemaker at heart" who "understands the mandate of the Southern Baptist Convention concerning the conservative resurgence and is personally committed to that mandate and to leading Southwestern Seminary in fulfilling the direction of the convention."

Hemphill, currently director of the Southern Baptist Center for Church Growth in Atlanta, generally espoused neutrality in convention politics while a prominent pastor in Virginia from 1981 to 1992. He did come forward, however, to endorse the presidency of conservative-backed Morris Chapman in 1990, a key win for the fundamental-conservative leadership group which has steered the convention to the right since 1979.

The search committee interviewed a total of six candidates from a list of more than 30 recommendations, said Ralph Pulley, board chairman. Committee members "rejoice over the almost miraculous way in which the search committee's unanimity evolved over the past four months," Pulley said.

"We think he is uniquely qualified academically, spiritually and experientially to lead our seminary into the 21st century," said Pulley, a Dallas attorney.

Neither Seaborn nor Pulley would comment when news stories broke almost a week earlier reporting that the search committee intended to offer the job to Hemphill. The Fort Worth Star-Telegram reported that the two men traveled to Atlanta to meet with Hemphill July 8, a report about which Hemphill would not comment.

Hemphill was out of his office and unavailable for comment after Seaborn's announcement on July 12.

The son of a Baptist pastor, Hemphill is from Morgantown, N.C. He is a graduate of Wake Forest University, with master's and doctor's degrees from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary and a doctorate from Cambridge University in England.

He has written six books on church growth. He and his wife, Paula, have three daughters.

-30-

'Rites of Passage' aid transition into adulthood for black youth

By Ken Camp

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- For many African-Americans, moving from childhood into adulthood can be a perilous passage. But a Baptist church in Texas is equipping black youth for the transition.

"Rites of Passage" is an Afrocentric, biblically based program pioneered by Greater Calvary Missionary Baptist Church in Austin designed to improve the self-worth, academic performance, social awareness and decision-making skills of black youth.

The disproportionate number of blacks in jail, on drugs and involved in violence reveals that African-American youth are programmed for failure, according to Sterling Lands II, the church's pastor.

"Every black male in this country is born on the road to prison. Every black female in this country is born on the way to the welfare line," he said.

Rites of Passage equips young people to choose a different road -- to salvation, education and liberation, Lands said.

"Rites of Passage grew out of our desire to deal with the problems of young African-American kids and to prevent their involvement in drugs, crime and teen pregnancy. Clearly, we are in the prevention business," Lands said.

Children enter the program at age 5 and graduate at 18. Participants meet every Saturday from 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. year-round, and daily during the summer.

"Simply stated, Rites of Passage is a maturation process," Lands explained. "It has a commonly agreed upon set of principles including guidelines, activities, tasks and trials which each youth must successfully master to earn the society-sanctioned title 'adult.' "

Lands, a former electronic engineer, fashioned the program after leadership development programs he took in the business world, combined with principles he gained during 80 hours of instruction at the Martin Luther King Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change in Atlanta.

The curriculum includes instruction in nonviolent conflict resolution, drug abuse prevention, communication skills, decision-making and problem-solving.

Instructional modules include "the world of work," which includes teaching job-related skills such as punctuality, commitment and loyalty, and "wonders in nature," combining scientific instruction, teachings about the stewardship of God's creation, and lessons on self-determination and self-reliance.

A computer lab allows students the opportunity to hone computer literacy skills while completing tutorials in the fundamentals of reading, writing and math.

Each morning, participants recite a pledge "to do the right thing, the right way, for the right reason, expecting the right results, to benefit my brothers and sisters and glorify God according to His Word, working for the salvation, education and liberation of our people."

Though grounded in a philosophy of nonviolence, the program uses military structure and discipline. Youth are divided into brigades, platoons and squads. Boys and girls are separated, and members of the youth corps promise to adhere to a demanding "manhood" or "womanhood" code of ethics.

The code, which participants review regularly, deals with behavior in school, at home and in the community and defines relationships with males, females and the children that students will rear someday.

"Some of the kids say it's too rigid, it's too strict. But I say the proof is in the pudding. They keep showing up every Saturday," Lands said.

Rites of Passage is tailored specifically for the African-American culture, and its viewpoint is distinctly Afrocentric. A program that respects African culture and views history through the prism of the African-American experience has a clear impact on the self-worth of black students, Lands maintained.

"Society has a well-oiled mechanism for identifying or defining success. Part of that mechanism is focused on certain ethnic traits and characteristics. That's not always intentional or part of any deliberate thought, but it is inculcated into the fabric of society," he said.

"Blacks -- people of African descent -- were never invited to this country. Hundreds of years ago they were stolen here. Once the reason for which they were brought here was gone, and the United States became an industrialized country, blacks became -- in the general mindset of the nation -- excess.

"Historically, this country has done a thorough job of degrading and defaming the worth and value of the black person. From the Constitution on down, the laws of the land denied the full personhood and humanity of African-Americans. When something like that is woven into the fabric of a nation, it takes decades -- maybe centuries -- to undo the damage."

By learning about the history of blacks in America, Lands said, Rites of Passage students become able to "release the rage and bitterness within that they don't even understand" and refocus that "negative energy" into positive pursuits.

While there are other programs for black youth that are Afrocentric, Rites of Passage is set apart by its strong biblical foundation, Lands said. Unlike other black youth programs that incorporate teachings of the Koran or elements of eastern mysticism such as visualization, Rites of Passage is exclusively Christ-centered and Bible-based.

"It's not enough to be Afrocentric. There are a lot of brothers in prison who are very Afrocentric -- to the extreme," Lands said.

"Being very black does not keep me from shooting someone down. It takes the supreme law of God. It is only in the Bible that man can know God's purpose. He has created us, and in His Word He has given the necessary instructions for making this machine work."

Realizing that the crisis of black youth is a "moral, ethical and spiritual problem," Lands said the Rites of Passage program needs not only be biblical and Afrocentric, but also age-comprehensive.

Starting students at age 5 is important because individual self-worth and self-image is formed during the early elementary school years, he noted.

"We let them know, 'You're worth something. You're loved. You're of value.' And we just keep playing those tapes over and over.

"If you wait until you're 13, the street institution has already given you two degrees. We can't compete with the street institution."

Rites of Passage started four years ago with eight young people enrolled. Currently, there are more than 75 children and youth in the program, and it is expected to expand dramatically in the coming months.

"We're passionate for this thing here," Lands said, concerning Rites of Passage. "There's no financial reward involved. There's no material reward.

"But we have an opportunity to make an impact on the lives of children who were destined for failure. We can turn that around. That's our reward here on this earth. And we know God has an even greater reward afterward."