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Experts ponder ways to fight media violence

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Violence in the media poses a crisis for America's children, noted experts invited to a July 10 public policy forum in Nashville, Tenn., convened by Vice President Al Gore.

The Family Re-Union conference, Gore's fourth annual conference on children, included thinkers, psychologists, lawyers and representatives of the entertainment industry.

"With only some dissent, experts agree that there's a link between TV violence and aggressive behavior," Gore told an audience of 800.

The issue of violence in media "represents a national public health problem," said Jerry Hickson, a Nashville pediatrician and member of Woodmont Baptist Church, who sat on a panel discussing how to protect children in a free society.

"We tend as a society to focus on portrayed acts of violence" on television, in music and in movies, Hickson said, adding he is more concerned about the effects of a "general and systematic lack of respect for the individual" in all kinds of media.

Some media messages portray humans as objects for pleasure while others view them as only consumers, Hickson said. "It's all part of the same process that the media has not done the job we ought to do in promoting the value of the individual and respect for authority."

Hickson said he is opposed to censorship, but would favor industry sponsored rating systems, similar to the one now used for motion pictures, to help parents make decisions about other media messages as well.

Parents must "be empowered to make choices" about media violence, Hickson said. "That choice may be they need to deny themselves some of the media participation that might be harmful to their children."

Panelists proposed a series of solutions to the problem, including:

-- Looking to the Federal Communications Commission to more aggressively regulate shows oriented toward sex and violence. That could mean rating shows for violent content or forcing networks to run certain shows later at night.

-- Getting producers or advertisers to subsidize quality shows, like "My So-Called Life," to save them from cancellation.

-- Applying new technology like the TV video chip that allows parents to block shows they don't want their kids to see.

-- Promoting "media literacy" in schools and at home to get families to think more critically about the ways TV and commercials alter behavior.

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-- By Bob Allen and Ray Waddle

Regular Bible readers report higher satisfaction, study says

By Bob Allen

NEW YORK (ABP) -- People who read their Bibles, attend church and value their relationship with God are more satisfied with their lives than those who don't, according to a recent survey commissioned by the American Bible Society.

According to the study, most Americans are either very satisfied (53 percent) or somewhat satisfied (40 percent) with their overall quality of life. However, people who prioritize spiritual and moral values are more likely to be "very satisfied" with their lives than those who don't read the Bible, attend church or prioritize moral living.

Fifty-eight percent of respondents who read the Bible at least once a week reported being very satisfied with life, compared to 49 percent of those who read the Bible less than once a year. Fifty-nine percent of those who attend church once a week or more reported high satisfaction, compared to 46 percent who don't attend church.

Americans who prioritize "leading a moral life" were more likely to be very satisfied (60 percent) than those who don't (39 percent). And 59 percent who said they prioritize their relationship with God were very satisfied, compared to 43 percent who do not value a spiritual relationship.

People who prioritize their relationship with God were far more satisfied with their spiritual life than those who don't (69 percent to 30 percent). They also reported higher satisfaction with their family (72 percent to 64 percent), friends (70 percent to 61 percent), job (40 percent to 33 percent), physical condition (35 percent to 32 percent) and financial situation (27 percent to 21 percent).

Other survey questions assessed religious habits and attitudes and opinions about the Bible. Other findings include:

-- Religion is an important priority for large numbers of Americans. Thirty-seven percent of those surveyed described "striving for a right relationship with God" as one of the one or two most important things to them. Thirty-five percent listed "leading a moral life" as a top priority, and 28 percent touted "a sense of spiritual well-being."

Twenty-five percent said it is important to take care of responsibilities to others, 13 percent to maintain physical fitness and 12 percent to achieve in their careers. Nine percent said a top priority is to have enough money to get the things they want and 7 percent rated the "ability to afford a few luxuries" as one of their top two priorities.

-- Americans go to church about as often as they eat out. Fifty-five percent say they attend church at least weekly while 53 percent go out for dinner once a week. Far fewer Americans say they read a novel (27 percent), buy a lottery ticket (25 percent), participate in competitive sports (11 percent), go dancing (10 percent) or go to the movies (9 percent) at least once a week.

Ninety-five percent watch television, 88 percent read a newspaper and 74 percent exercise sometime during the week, the study reported.

-- Most Americans own and read the Bible. Twenty-four percent read their Bibles daily and 23 percent at least once a week, according to the survey. Fifty-nine percent read it at least once a month. Twenty-two percent said they never read the Bible and 7 percent said they do so but less than once a year.

Women are more likely to read their Bibles regularly than men (57 percent to 35 percent) and African Americans (63 percent) than Hispanics (48 percent) or whites (45 percent). People over 50 are more likely to read the Bible at least once weekly (54 percent) than those aged 30-49 (42 percent) or 21-29 (36 percent).

Ninety-two percent said they own a copy of the Bible and 38 percent report owning four copies or more. The King James Version is the most popular translation, read most often by half the respondents, followed by the New International Version (12 percent), The Living Bible (7 percent), Revised Standard Version (6 percent), New King James Version (5 percent), Good News Bible (4 percent) and New American Standard (4 percent).

Eighteen percent described themselves as "very familiar" with the Bible and 53 percent as "somewhat familiar," while 18 percent said they were "not very familiar" and 11 percent "not at all familiar" with the Bible.

-- Most people find the Bible useful. Ninety-two percent of respondents agreed with the statements "The Bible is a good source of moral teaching, independent of religious significance" and "The Bible offers good guidance on how to live our lives." Only 59 percent, however, said they turn to the Bible for advice.

Eighty-seven percent said the Bible is "the revealed word of God" and 72 percent said they wished the language of the Bible were easier to understand.

Most respondents (88 percent) cited "The Golden Rule" as the most useful saying in guiding values, beliefs and actions, followed by "Love God with all your heart, with all your mind and all your soul" (84 percent) and Shakespeare's "To thine own self be true" (82 percent).

Only 22 percent chose "the end justifies the means" as useful and 26 percent chose "look out for number one." Forty-eight percent found the biblical "turn the other cheek" a useful saying. And only 25 percent said Exodus 21:24's "an eye for an eye; a tooth for a tooth" is useful, compared to 47 percent who rated the saying "not useful."

"This survey confirms what we have long believed was true -- Americans are a deeply spiritual people," said Eugene Habecker, president of the New York-based American Bible Society. "The Bible is very important in many people's lives and a significant number would prefer an easier-to-understand Bible, written in contemporary language," he noted.

The national survey, performed by KRC Research & Consulting, questioned 1,212 U.S. residents between March 30 and April 7 on their attitudes and opinions about the Bible. The study reported a margin of error of plus-or-minus 3.4 percent.

The survey was timed to coincide with the launch of the American Bible Society's new Contemporary English Version of the Complete Bible.

Seventh-day Adventists affirm Christ's return

UTRECHT, The Netherlands (ABP) -- Jesus is coming soon, leaders of the Seventh-day Adventist Church proclaimed at the denomination's recent World Congress, but they denounced efforts to predict a specific date.

"We can affirm that we are not following cunningly devised prophetic fantasies when we preach the power and the coming of the Lord Jesus Christ," Ralph Thompson, world secretary of the church, told a crowd of 30,000 at the Adventists' World Congress in July at Utrecht, The Netherlands, according to a report by Ecumenical News International.

Adventists were once "branded as calamity-howlers" because they proclaimed impending end-times, Thompson said. "Today it is the politicians and secular intellectuals who are the calamity-howlers. A mood of pessimism is setting in," he added.

Christians are "ultimate optimists," Thompson said, "because they see an ever-increasing number of signs that earthly history is nearing its end with the coming of Christ."

Adventism was born as part of an international movement in the mid-19th century emphasizing the second coming of Christ. The movement's original leader in America, New York farmer William Miller, predicted Jesus would come in 1844. Modern leaders acknowledge that mistake cost the movement credibility.

"While anticipating Christ's return, Adventists reject any attempt to set specific dates for the event," said Robert Folkenberg, who was re-elected world president of the Adventist Church.

"The approaching end of the second millennium of the Christian era undoubtedly is leading some misguided persons to propose date-setting schematics and events tied to the year 2000, the end of the world and the return of Jesus," Folkenberg declared.

"Adventists have no confidence in such speculative efforts, for they violate Christ's explicit statements that although humans may indeed recognize when his return is near, they cannot know the exact time," he continued.

Another speaker said "wouldn't be at all surprised" if Christ should return "within the next few decades," a view shared widely by conference members.

The church claims 8.5 million members worldwide and numbers more than 700,000 in the United States and is rapidly growing, leaders say. Adherents receive high visibility for certain distinctive teachings: They worship on Saturday, not Sunday. They are vegetarians and they reject alcohol and tobacco.

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-- By ABP staff

Name change expected to protect Armenian Baptists

YEREVAN, Armenia (ABP) -- In a move aimed at protecting Baptists from discrimination, the Baptist Union of Armenia has changed its name to the Union of Evangelical Churches.

The change unites the group with other evangelical groups in Armenia and France. Previously, the Armenian government considered the Armenia Baptist Union a dangerous sect. With its new name, the union has reportedly gained full recognition.

The situation in Armenia has stabilized since police interrupted the Easter service at a Baptist church in Yerevan and temporarily arrested the pastor and president of the Baptist Union, a source in Russia told BWA News.

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-- By ABP staff

Nepal Baptists set goal of 300 churches

KATHMANDU, Nepal (ABP) -- Baptists in Nepal have voted to endorse a goal of 300 churches by the year 2000, according to the Baptist World Alliance.

The Nepal Baptist Church Council agreed to win converts from other faiths and not to take members from existing Christian churches in a May 14-15 meeting in Kathmandu, the July/August issue of BWA News reported.

The Nepal Baptist Convention currently numbers 2,500 members in 20 churches and 35 missions, including a new Baptist church in Kathmandu with 29 members, most of whom are new converts, the magazine reported.

The predominant religion in Nepal is Hinduism. About 90 percent of the country's 22 million citizens are Hindu.

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-- By ABP staff

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