

# Associated Baptist Press

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## House approves ban of partial-birth abortions

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives has approved a bill that would ban a controversial late-term abortion procedure known as partial-birth abortion.

The bill, approved Nov. 1 by a vote of 288-139, would make the procedure, which is used only rarely, a felony. Doctors convicted under the law could serve up to two years in prison.

Opponents to the bill said the procedure saves women's lives and that it is a first step by abortion opponents to unravel the landmark 1973 Roe v. Wade ruling, which legalized most abortions.

"This is a dangerous piece of legislation which would ban a range of late-term abortion procedures that are used when a woman's health or life is threatened or when a fetus is diagnosed with severe abnormalities incompatible with life," said Rep. Sheila Jackson Lee, D-Texas.

Supporters, meanwhile, argued that the procedure is used most often in elective, not therapeutic, abortions and that many doctors consider it an unacceptable medical procedure.

In a prepared statement, Rep. Charles Canady, R-Fla., quoted an obstetrician who said in a situation where a mother's life was in danger, "no doctor would employ the partial-birth method of abortion."

The House bill would ban abortions in which a doctor "partially delivers a living fetus before killing the fetus and completing the delivery."

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Proponents used graphic posters describing a partial-birth abortion procedure during the debate. The procedure involves delivering the entire fetus, except for the head, through the birth canal before a syringe is inserted in the brain to end its life.

The bill would allow doctors to avoid prosecution if they performed the procedure with a reasonable belief it was necessary to save the life of the mother. Opponents said other procedures are more dangerous to the mother and that doctors would have a hard time proving there was no other way to save the woman's life.

Rep. Nancy Johnson, D-Conn., said she was appalled at a suggestion that a Caesarean section could be used as an alternative to a partial-birth abortion. "Women die every year of the complications of Caesarean sections," she said. "Why would you ask your daughter to shoulder this small but real risk of death unnecessarily and for a fetus with no potential for life?"

Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., said he was angered that the bill was debated under a closed rule that prohibited members from "offering amendments to explicitly allow for the protection of the life or serious health of the mother."

He said the bill requires the doctor who performs the procedure to carry the burden of proof in a court. "Obviously, it will keep people from doing it (the procedure)," Frank said.

Both sides were looking beyond the bill to the larger issue of the legality of abortion. "This was the beginning of that date on when life begins," said Rep. Bob Dornan of California, a Republican presidential candidate and abortion foe. "This is a great step forward to defend the sanctity of life."

Rep. Carolyn Maloney, D-N.Y., a supporter of abortion rights, said the Republican-controlled Congress has now passed 13 anti-abortion measures. The Nov. 1 vote was the "most extreme," she said. "But I know that the people who backed this bill won't stop here. They have stated publicly that this is only the beginning."

The bill now moves to the Senate for consideration where a similar bill has already been proposed.

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## **'Human dimension' overlooked in Waco tragedy, Baptist testifies**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- More reliance on behavioral science and less on firepower might have averted the 1993 tragedy in Waco, Texas, that claimed the lives of 87 Branch Davidians and four federal agents, a Baptist sociologist told a Senate panel Oct. 31.

Nancy Ammerman, professor of sociology of religion at the Center for Social and Religious Research at Hartford Seminary in Hartford, Conn., told the Senate Judiciary Committee that too little attention was paid to the "human dimension" in the conflict between Branch Davidian leader David Koresh and federal law enforcement officials.

"I am convinced that at the heart of the disaster in Waco was the decision -- first by the BATF (Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms) and then by FBI tactical units -- to treat this as primarily a military-style operation," Ammerman told the panel, chaired by Utah Republican Orrin Hatch.

"Once that decision was made, everyone's energy went into assessing firepower and angles of attack, leaving the human dimension of the situation too easily forgotten."

Ammerman, who served on a panel of experts assembled to help the Justice and Treasury departments evaluate the Waco tragedy, said the BATF consulted no behavioral science experts and that while the FBI sought such input, it failed to heed it.

She said the FBI's behavioral science team offered "on-target" advice but was out-ranked and outnumbered in the agency's decision making.

"If the human dimension of law enforcement tasks are to be taken fully into account, those who have human-science expertise must have equal rank with those whose expertise is firepower," she said.

Behavioral scientists, Ammerman told the panel, "would probably have advised the BATF that the estimation of danger posed by the Davidians, in spite of the armaments that they had, was probably overblown."

The overestimation occurred, she said, because the BATF relied primarily on information from a "deprogrammed" ex-Branch Davidian.

Behavioral scientists also would have advised law enforcement that "any group under siege is likely to turn inward, to bond to each other, not to break apart, to follow their leader ever more strongly," she said.

People who study religious groups have learned to "take seriously the religious beliefs and rhetoric of the group," she said.

While what the group says may sound like "Bible babble," as it did to the Waco negotiators, Ammerman said, no real negotiation is possible unless the groups religious views are taken seriously.

"Wise strategists will take seriously the power of those religious beliefs and will weigh carefully the competing claims of religious liberty against the legitimate societal limits that need to be placed on everyone," she said.

In opening the two days of hearings, Hatch said their purpose is not to assign blame to individuals or the administration but to "find the lessons in this tragedy, make necessary corrections in our actions or our thinking and then move on."

Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, ranking Democratic member of the panel, emphasized the difference between mistakes and malevolence.

"The record of the Waco incident documents mistakes," he said. "What the record from Waco does not evidence, however, is any improper motive or intent on the part of law enforcement."

Hatch noted that the committee's investigation included more than 300,000 documents and 700 hours of video and audio tape analysis.

Biden noted that both the FBI and BATF "have candidly admitted that serious mistakes occurred at Waco and that improvements needed to be made."

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## **Baptist Peace Fellowship board approves relocation of offices**

COMER, Ga. (ABP) -- The Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America will move its offices to Lake Junaluska, N.C., from Memphis, Tenn., early in 1996, directors voted Oct. 19-21.

The move is to allow Executive Director Ken Sehested to move where his wife, Nancy Hastings Sehested, is working. She recently resigned as pastor of Prescott Memorial Baptist Church in Memphis to become writer-in-residence at Sunrise Ministries, a North Carolina retreat center. That temporary assignment has recently become more permanent as she assumed codirector responsibilities for the center.

Two other full-time staff members have decided not to relocate. Paula Womack, associate editor for the Baptist Peacemaker journal, is moving to Chapel Hill, N.C., to work with Summit House, a half-way house for non-violent female offenders with children. Carole Thais, business manager, will remain in Memphis with her family and seek other employment.

In other business at the meeting at Jubilee Partners, a refugee ministry in Comer, Ga., the Peace Fellowship board approved plans for a May 1996 "friendship tour" to Mexico. The trip will include a visit to the Chiapas state, the site of violent unrest in recent years. The invitation for the trip was issued by the staff and faculty of the Baptist Seminary of Mexico City whose rector, Javier Ulloa Castellanos, was elected to the Peace Fellowship board.

They also approved plans to cosponsor with the Asian Baptist Federation a Baptist Peace Conference in December 1996 in Bangkok, Thailand.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Furman possible site for presidential debate**

GREENVILLE, S.C. (ABP) -- Furman University, a Baptist school in Greenville, S.C., is among 10 universities and colleges being considered as possible sites for presidential debates in 1996.

Along with announcing the 10 sites, the Commission on Presidential Debates said there will be three presidential debates and one vice presidential debate in 1996. The four debates, each 90 minutes, will take place on consecutive Wednesdays -- Sept. 25, Oct. 2, Oct. 9 and Oct. 16.

"We are excited to learn that the commission is considering Furman as a site for a presidential debate next fall," said Furman President David Shi. "This will be a wonderful opportunity to showcase Furman and the Greenville community."

According to the commission, 97 million Americans watched the third and final televised presidential debate in 1992, the largest audience ever. Exit polls in 1988 and 1982 found that more voters based their balloting decisions on the debates than any other single issue.

Other possible debate sites are George Washington University in Washington, D.C.; Trinity College in Hartford, Conn.; Michigan State University in East Lansing; University of South Florida in Tampa; University of Maryland in College Park; University of Oklahoma in Norman; University of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia; University of San Diego in San Diego, Calif.; and Washington University in St. Louis, Mo.

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-- By ABP staff

## 'Banishment' of moderates proves fruitful, Graves says at inauguration

By Greg Warner

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- "Banishment" of moderates from the Southern Baptist Convention has unexpectedly revitalized theological education among Baptists, according to two moderate seminary educators.

"Thank God for being banished. It is perhaps the best thing that could have happened to us," declared Thomas Graves, who was inaugurated as president of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond Oct. 27.

Graves, 48, and other moderate seminary educators have left or been forced out of the six Southern Baptist seminaries during the last decade as conservatives have engineered a rightward shift at the schools.

Rather than destroying progressive theological education, those changes have forced Baptist moderates to forge new, improved models for training church leaders, agreed Graves and Russell Dilday, acting dean of Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University, one of about a dozen new seminaries or seminary-type programs taking shape among Baptists.

New alternatives in theological training are "bringing new life and color to the landscape, demonstrating again the power of God to bring resurrection out of defeat and discouragement," said Dilday, who was fired as president of the SBC's Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary by conservative trustees in 1993.

"Properly educating the future leaders of our churches and our denomination is one of the only ways, and certainly the most promising way, forward out of our denominational turmoil," Dilday said.

Dilday presented the first Solon B. Cousins Lectureship at the Richmond, Va., seminary Oct. 26 as part of its "Jubilate!" celebration, marking the seminary's fifth year and Graves' inauguration.

Graves, president of the 164-student seminary since 1991, was officially installed in the post Oct. 27 in a ceremony at First Baptist Church in Richmond. Surrounded by the school's faculty, trustees and staff and representatives from 48 other schools, each in academic regalia, Graves was led in the inaugural vows by trustee chairman Ronald Crawford.

Graves was invested with a towel -- symbolic of Jesus' washing of his disciples' feet -- instead of the traditional staff or medallion as a symbol of the office. It is a sign, said Crawford, that true Christian authority is found in humility and service. Graves later declared the seminary would be a servant to Baptists, the larger Christian community and the city of Richmond.

Thomas Halbrooks, dean of the faculty, read an inaugural resolution from the faculty, who praised Graves for bringing the seminary from "little more than a dream" to a reality. "We have dropped a pebble into the pond of theological education," with ramifications "far beyond our imaginings," Halbrooks said.

The Richmond seminary has grown from 32 students in its initial class to 164 students and 20 faculty members. It is in the process of purchasing its first building from the Presbyterian School of Christian Education, which has been renting space to the seminary. The two schools, joined by the School of Theology at Virginia Union University -- an American Baptist school -- comprise the Richmond Theological Consortium, sharing a library, classrooms and other facilities.

Graves told reporters before his inauguration that Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond will continue to grow, building a chapel and dormitory on land adjacent to the existing building. Those needs will fuel a \$7 million to \$10 million capital funds drive over the next five years, he said.

But there is no desire for a dramatically larger enrollment, Graves said. "This will remain an average-sized theological school," which he said means about 250 students.

Among the bumper crop of new Baptist alternatives for theological training, the Richmond seminary stands out as the only free-standing seminary, bolstered by funding from Virginia Baptists, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and others.

Baptist universities such as Mercer, Wake Forest, Samford, Baylor and Campbell each have started theology schools or seminaries, while Gardner-Webb and Hardin-Simmons have added divinity programs. Non-Baptist universities such as Duke, Princeton and Emory are attracting students to new Baptist studies programs. Still other options are under discussion.

Such programs are like seedlings sprouting in the aftermath of Southern Baptists' denominational firestorm, Dilday said in his lecture.

In contrast to this "lively renaissance," he said, are half a dozen Southern Baptist seminaries left weakened by denominational conflict. Though still standing, he said, they are charred reminders of the glory of an earlier day.

Graves, in his inaugural address, recalled leaving the faculty of the SBC's Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1987 "with little hope for the future of Baptist life as I had known it." Baptist moderates, lay people and women all felt alienated by the SBC's conservative swing, he said. "The denominational world of Southern Baptists was crumbling around us."

But, noted Graves, "destruction can be the best catalyst for creative advance." He quoted Richmond faculty member Bill Rogers' observation that "the Southern Baptist Convention fell apart at a very convenient time," because it forced moderates to rethink and reshape the way theological education should be done.

"With your help," Graves said, "we moved beyond the battles of denominational warfare to develop a seminary community with an innovative program" stressing spirituality, global ministry and involvement of laity.

Those three characteristics are what set the Richmond seminary apart from other Baptist options, he said.

-- Spirituality. Required courses in spiritual development are aimed at filling "the most gaping hole in current seminary training," Graves said. "To know all about God, but to be unrelated to God, is a tragedy too often played out in our theological schools."

-- Global ministry. Richmond students are required to serve a missions internship, "whether in the hollows of Appalachia or the dusty villages of Zimbabwe," he said. "Baptists have always had a tremendous missionary zeal at the very center of their faith, and it should be reflected in their seminary curriculum as well, not just in terms of study but actual practice caring for a world in need."

-- Lay involvement. The seminary's field education program assigns a committee of laypersons to advise each student. "Lay persons are the real experts in Baptist church life," Graves said. "Why not invite them to participate fully in the students' education?"

Such innovation is the key to the survival of alternative theological training, Graves told reporters before the inauguration. Although there is no shortage of new moderate options, he said he is already concerned by "the lack of creativity in what's being done."

"It's sad we have taken this opportunity just to do theological education in a new place," he said.

"There is a limit to what non-fundamentalist Baptists can support, and we've exceeded it probably. I'm not sure all these are going to be around in a few years."

"We've never had enough creative options for Baptists," he added. "Any new option needs to ask, 'How can we do this better?'"

Dillard, in his speech a day earlier, listed 10 proposals for reshaping theological education:

- Affirm objective truth in contrast to postmodernism's skepticism.
- Commit to serious scholarship, admitting no contradiction between "rigorous reason and fervent faith."
- Emphasize character development and spiritual formation so that "the heart as well as the head" are taught.
- Balance both the intellectual and practical aspects of ministry.
- Re-emphasize preaching.
- Combine the disciplines of theology, education and music into an integrated program.
- Take the priesthood of all believers seriously by making seminary training available to lay leaders.
- Nurture a recommitment to Baptist distinctives.
- Harness the potential of communication technologies.
- Embrace academic accreditation as "a compelling motivation to maintain quality."

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-- Beth McMahon contributed to this story. Photos available from Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

## **Book by former SBC leader describes churches' failure to respond to AIDS**

By Bob Allen

BIG CANOE, Ga. (ABP) -- As a long-time Baptist preacher and leader, Jimmy Allen encouraged many churches to reach out to people in need. When his own family was wrecked by AIDS, however, the church let him down.

"I'm having what I call a lover's quarrel with the church -- not merely Baptist churches but all churches that claim to represent Jesus Christ," Allen says in a new book, "Burden of a Secret: A Story of Truth and Mercy in the Face of AIDS" by Moorings.

Allen, a former Southern Baptist Convention president and agency head, describes the AIDS epidemic as the greatest challenge facing modern churches. AIDS provides churches with an opportunity to express loving compassion but also may force many contemporary churches to re-examine their reason for being, Allen said.

Allen, now chaplain for a mountain resort community in Big Canoe, Ga., is former president of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission. He was SBC president in 1978-79 and was also active in forming the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of moderate Southern Baptists, in 1991.

Part tragedy, part theology, part a case study on the complexities of modern family life, Allen's story reads like a modern-day Job. The adversary is AIDS, which has devastated the Allen family.

Already the disease has taken the lives of a grandson and daughter-in-law. Another grandson is dying with AIDS and a son has also been infected.

Allen's family learned in the fall of 1985 that his daughter-in-law, Lydia, had received the AIDS virus three years earlier from a blood transfusion while giving birth to her first son, Matthew. She passed

the disease on to Matthew and to a second son, Bryan, before being diagnosed. Bryan died in 1986, when he was nine months old. Lydia died in 1992. At 13, Matt has survived longer than expected but is near death.

In the meantime, Allen learned that another family member, his son Skip, who is gay, has the HIV virus that causes AIDS.

Aside from the destruction of AIDS, Allen said he is most disappointed by the response of churches to his family's crisis.

When Allen's son, Scott, learned his wife and sons were infected, he went to the pastor of the Disciples of Christ church in Colorado where he worked as a staff member. He was fired on the spot, he says.

They moved to Texas, where a string of churches told them they were unwelcome because of fear and ignorance about AIDS, about which the public was just becoming aware.

The family at first decided to keep the disease private, to protect Matt from the discrimination and stigma associated with AIDS. They told only people who needed to know in order to help with Matt's care. They also talked privately with pastors of churches to ask if Matt could attend Sunday school, because they felt it would be unethical for parents of other children not to be informed of his condition.

They went public after Lydia's funeral -- at which AIDS was not even mentioned -- talking to media including the New York Times and NBC's "Dateline" program. When he realized in 1994 that people with AIDS were still being shunned by churches, Allen said he decided to write the book.

Since his family's experience, Allen said, "I find myself in the awkward position of trying to define and defend the role of churches in a society that rewards congregations more for successful building programs than for rescuing the dying."

"When AIDS hit our family, I was sure the church would respond better than it did, not because it was my family that was afflicted, but because it could have been anybody's family. I believed that given the information and insight, inspired by a leader with vision, the local church would rise above being an institution and become a family," Allen wrote.

"I forgot that families can also become dysfunctional," he said. "They can lose their direction. They can suffer from broken communication. They can center on what they look like instead of who they are."

Allen said he found compassion in unexpected places, like Matt and Bryan's pediatrician, Janet Squires, a Catholic, and Matt's classmates at Lakewood Elementary School, who overcame their fear of AIDS by learning about the disease and surrounded him with love.

"Lakewood Elementary School, a public school, exemplified far more of the Spirit of Christ than did many of the institutions that bear his name," Allen said.

Allen lamented a "creeping paralysis" that overcomes churches that begin with good intentions to reach hurting people but over time become preoccupied with numbers, buildings and success.

"In many ways, that's where our churches are today. We have long forgotten what it was we set out to do -- to reach the world with Jesus' message of love and his healing touch through us," he said.

Despite that assessment, Allen noted "there are encouraging signs that the church is awakening to the AIDS challenge."

Each of the churches in Texas that refused to admit Matt to Sunday school has now established an infectious-disease policy, he said. The Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission has produced a video presentation of Allen's story titled, "Echoes from the Valley, a Beginning of an AIDS Ministry." The SBC-auxiliary Woman's Missionary Union is using the video in a nationwide AIDS awareness emphasis.

Allen challenged churches to become informed about AIDS and to confront their feelings about homosexuality, since the disease most often affects gay men. Most Christians, but not all, regard

homosexual behavior as sin, he said, which creates a moral dilemma for those who want to minister caringly to those with AIDS.

"Can we Christians overcome our prejudices and love past our theology to help meet the needs of dying people? I pray so," Allen wrote. "If we truly love the person, we can deal with his or her deviant behavior, whether it be dishonesty, thievery, drunkenness, promiscuity, drug addiction or homosexuality. As we often say, but have a much more difficult time doing, the Christian is to hate the sin but love the sinner."

He urged ministers to talk about AIDS from the pulpit and for churches to abandon what he calls their "leave-it-to-the-Samaritan complex," which leaves the care of AIDS victims to outsiders.

"Ironically, churches are ideally equipped to respond to AIDS," Allen said. "When churches are at their best, there is acceptance; grace means 'undeserved love.' With adequate information about how AIDS spreads, caregivers can put aside fear and compassion can flow."

In addition to his struggle with AIDS, Allen also describes in the book another son's problems with schizophrenia -- with medication he is able to lead a normal life -- and his wife's struggle with depression.

He also tells of losing his lifelong friend and Lydia's father, Luke Williams, to a stroke during the crisis. He said Williams also was a victim of AIDS. "I am convinced that Luke Williams died of AIDS -- not in the usual sense, but I believe that the stress the disease caused to Luke and Joyce and the other members of his family finally got to be more than he could take," Allen wrote.

The crisis has had its toll on the family's faith, Allen said. Skip is deeply devoted to Bible study and prayer but rejects organized religion because of judgmentalism and rejection of the homosexual lifestyle. Scott's disillusionment with the church has turned him to Eastern religions.

Allen terms the experience his "Gethsemane" -- an allusion to the garden where Jesus prayed in agony the night before his crucifixion -- which has tempered his faith.

"God does not leave you alone in your Gethsemane," Allen said. "He is always there for you in your need. Your only responsibility is to trust him. Before the ministering spirits can come, though, you must be able to say, 'Not my will, Lord, but Thy will be done.'"

Allen said Nov. 2 that Matt celebrated a birthday Oct. 4, but has since declined rapidly. "We were amazed he was able to survive till his 13th birthday. That was a major goal for him, to be 13," Allen said.

Matt was able to sit in a wheelchair for a party with friends from school but has been unable to get out of bed since. "He is sinking daily, one plateau down to another, but we don't know how long he's going to last," Allen said.

Allen said "Burden of a Secret" has been well received. It has been profiled in several news media, including the Dallas Morning News, which used excerpts from the book as a four-part series. "I think it's making a contribution to the attitudes of people," he said.

"It was a painful process to write, so I'm glad it seems to be helpful," he said.

## Excerpts from "Burden of a Secret," by Jimmy Allen (Moorings, \$17.99)

As we drove across a bridge, Matt turned to me and as nonchalantly as if he were asking me the time, he asked, "Granddad, did you know I'm dying?"

His words had the force of a lightning strike. I had known they would come eventually. Matt was too bright not to know he was different. None of the other kids at school received gamma-globulin infusions every three weeks, or took 36 pills a day. Matt did. ...

Although I was unprepared for Matt's blunt inquiry concerning his death, it was typical of Matt to open a serious subject out of the blue. He usually mulled things over a long time before letting them surface. ...

"Yes, Matt; I know you are dying," I finally mustered the courage to say. "I am dying, too. All of us are dying. The only difference is when we are going to die. We don't know when it will be our time to go. I might die before you do. Probably this disease will make you die before I do. But we all die. Is that scary to you?"

"Yes. But I'll get to see Bryan."

"That's true. He is with God in heaven. He's waiting for you. The two of you will have a good time together. Then one of these days, I'll be there with you. We all will be."

That seemed to satisfy Matt for the moment, and we moved on to more mundane topics. That conversation, however, altered the tone of our lives. From that day on, death hung as a backdrop for each scene, whether we acknowledged its presence or not. Once mentioned, it could not be ignored. It popped into view from time to time, usually at Matt's initiative.

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Matt was amazingly brave in dealing with the pain AIDS brought to his body. During the early days of our secret, I went to visit him one day at the Children's Hospital in Fort Worth. It was a mild winter day, but a chill swept over me as I walked up the stairs of the hospital. I hunched inside my coat and tried to still my heart as I was headed for the ward where my enthusiastic, often laughing, three-year-old grandson coped with another battery of tests and shots. He was registered under an assumed name -- the secret had begun.

I reached Matt's bedside as the doctors and nurses left, their blood-gathering chores completed. Large tears glistened on Matt's cheeks. "Matt, what's wrong?" I asked.

"He said, 'Granddad, I'm not very brave.'"

I reached down to hug him and said, "Why Matt? Why do you say you're not very brave?"

"The doctor kept telling me, 'Be brave, be brave,' but I'm not very brave."

I stood at Matt's bedside, soothing him, but inside I was boiling. This child, born in a crisis of life and death, had already been through three operations. He probably had experienced more pain in his three years than that doctor or I had known in a lifetime. I had never spent a night in a hospital as a patient. But as a pastor, husband and father, I had visited a lot of medical institutions. I wondered how many times the doctor had been flat on his back, while being punctured repeatedly with needles.

"Matt," I said, "you are the bravest person I have ever known. You're brave, baby, you are brave."

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The week following Valentine's Day in 1995, on a beautiful Texas winter day, the Lakewood Elementary School in Dallas conducted an outdoor ceremony to say a final good-bye to Matt, to celebrate his life, and to prepare his friends for his death. Several of Matt's schoolmates and teachers expressed what he had meant to them. To the music of "The Circle of Life" from the Disney movie "The Lion King," the Lakewood students paraded around Matt, surrounding him with music, banners, and most of all, love.

Then it was Matt's turn. Standing shakily on an outdoor makeshift stage in the school's parking lot, Matt spoke to the students and teachers. In a voice that would have been barely audible had it not been for the help of a microphone, Matt said, "Thank you for all the support you have given me and my family over the past six years. It has meant so much to me, and them."

Many of Matt's friends and teachers were overcome by tears during the emotional ceremony. When it was over, everyone realized that death really is part of the circle of life.

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While Matt was still able to attend school, I had lunch one day with him and some new friends. I listened intently as Matt described his experience with churches to his dining companions. Referring to an incident at church, Matt nonchalantly said, "That was before they kicked us out."

I have never heard sadder words.

Although damaged by the church at a young age, Matt at least had a loving, supportive Christian family to help point him toward the Peaceful Place. Others who have AIDS do not have anyone to love them and tell them of God's love. Reaching these people and their families with the message of hope and salvation is the church's greatest challenge.

If we hope to reach out to them, we must hurry. Everyone with AIDS is dying; we must reach them before it is too late.

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