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New groups cross old religious boundaries

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Are you a fundamentalist, evangelical or liberal?

In the future, that question could be more significant than whether you're a Baptist, Presbyterian, Catholic or Episcopalian, according to a number of sociologists and church historians.

"Denominationalism is still here but is losing its relevance. It just doesn't mean as much anymore," explained Leon McBeth, church history professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"In the future, people will still be Baptist, Presbyterian, Lutheran, Methodist. But that is increasingly irrelevant," McBeth continued. "What is increasingly significant is whether in their own understanding they are charismatic, evangelical, liberal, independent or fundamentalist."

"It makes more difference whether you're a member of one of these newly emerging groups than what denomination you happen to belong to," he said.

In practical terms, this means that conservative Baptists often find more in common with conservative Catholics and conservative Presbyterians than with more liberal Baptists.

"In the old days, someone who said, 'I'm a Methodist' implied a world of meaning in that label," said Timothy Weber, church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Not so anymore.

Imagine the old denominational classifications as horizontal lines stacked on top of each other. Then imagine a series of new vertical lines sweeping down through all those denominational bars. These vertical lines represent the new crosscurrents of religious affiliation, or affinity groupings as some scholars call them.

"Until 1960, more than 90 percent of American Protestants who moved to a new community used denominational names as their primary guide to selecting a new church," according to Herb Miller, a Texas church-

growth consultant and editor of a monthly newsletter called Net Results. "Since 1960, fewer than 50 percent of Protestants use the denominational label on the lawn as the primary means of picking a congregation."

Rather than being guided by denominational labels, most people now select a church by evaluating its worship style, quality of caring, types of ministry and theological frame of reference, Miller wrote in a recent article titled "Does It Matter What Your Church Believes?"

Modern Americans "consciously or unconsciously" pick a church that falls into one of five theological categories that cross denominational lines, Miller said. His five categories are charismatic, fundamentalist, evangelical, moderate and liberal.

Other scholars and church consultants categorize these transdenominational groups differently, adding labels such as progressive, orthodox, conservative, independent and a wide range of variations on the term evangelical.

This trend creates a variety of strange bedfellows, both on the religious and political scene.

"What happens at the local level is that people put together ideas and strategies from all sorts of different traditions, almost without regard for which ideological camp those ideas are supposed to be associated with," said Nancy Ammerman, a Baptist sociologist who studies religion at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

"So you'll get a local congregation that is absolutely gung-ho for Habitat for Humanity, which is supposedly a liberal initiative, and also gung-ho for the Christian Coalition and also supporting alternatives to abortion without taking a hardline pro-life stance," she explained.

"People are simply putting together all kinds of strategies at the local level that don't fall along the liberal-conservative lines anymore," Ammerman said.

Political issues have helped believers of all denominations -- even Protestants and Catholics -- come together in these new affinity groupings, said Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists and former news chief for the Baptist Joint Committee.

"I think particularly the pro-life cluster of issues has enabled people who previously never would have thought about getting together to put aside those differences," he said.

One example is the 1994 signing of a document called "Evangelicals and Catholics Together," in which a wide range of conservative Protestant figures joined conservative Catholics in a statement opposing abortion and speaking to other social issues.

While conservative groups such as the Christian Coalition and Moral Majority may be better known, similar transdenominational groupings have developed among liberals and progressive evangelicals.

For example, author Tony Campolo and several other high-profile evangelicals have formed a new group that will hold its first public meeting in Washington in February. They bill themselves as an alternative to the Religious Right, extending the "pro-life" ethic beyond abortion to include opposition to capital punishment and concern for the poor.

The trend toward theological crosscurrents also is beginning to impact theological education, particularly as factions within certain denominational traditions lose confidence in their denominational seminaries.

One way this is unfolding is through the creation of special studies programs at some schools. For example, Duke University's divinity school now has a Baptist studies program and similar programs for students of other faith traditions.

Another variation on this trend is beginning to form in Kentucky, as Baptist moderates, disenfranchised from the conservative bent of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, are seeking to form a coalition with Lexington Theological Seminary, a Disciples of Christ school.

Ultimately, the crosscurrents of religious affinity groups will not destroy traditional denominations, McBeth asserted. But this trend has created a fertile field for a new type of church to thrive: the independent megachurch, he said.

These are "strong churches that basically have outgrown their need for denominational ties," he said. "They can make it on their own," training their own ministers, producing their own literature, developing their own programs.

McBeth compared these independent churches to Notre Dame University's football team.

Most college football programs are associated with other schools through a particular conference, but Notre Dame is not. "They play football and do it very well, but they go wherever they will and play whomever they wish," he said.

So it is with megachurches that either have cut formal ties with their denomination or are only marginally associated with a denomination, McBeth said. "They've not so much rejected the denomination as outgrown it. The only thing they need from a denomination is the pastor's pension board, and they don't always need that."

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Common designations for new religious groupings

(ABP) -- Although different people create different labels for the new affinity groupings in American religion, here's a rundown on some of the most-commonly identified groups:

-- Fundamentalists most often are viewed as ultra-conservatives who embrace a very clear-cut set of beliefs from which little or no variation is allowed. Classical fundamentalism begins with five fundamentals of doctrine outlined in the early 20th century: verbal inspiration of Scripture as the word of God; virgin birth of Christ; substitutionary atonement for sin through Christ's death on the cross; bodily resurrection of Christ; second-coming of Christ. Fundamentalists tend to be separatists. They also usually embrace a premillennial, dispensational view of the end times. Examples: Jerry Falwell, Bob Jones.

-- Charismatics emphasize personal communication from the Holy Spirit and place a high value on miracles, healing and spiritual gifts such as speaking in tongues. Examples: Pat Robertson, Oral Roberts.

-- Evangelicals often share the same theological beliefs as fundamentalists, but generally are perceived as less strident and more open to dialogue with people of other beliefs. This is a broad category with many possible subgroups to be found within it. Evangelicals are not isolationists but seek to be accepted in the mainstream of American culture while holding on to their distinct doctrines. They embrace mainstream accredited educational efforts. They also are more likely to talk about the Bible being infallible rather than inerrant. As their name suggests, evangelicals place high priority on missions and evangelism. Examples: James Dobson, Chuck Swindoll.

-- Progressive evangelicals are a strongly emerging subgroup of the evangelical world. Using the same doctrinal base as evangelicals, they mix in elements of a more liberal social agenda. Thus, progressive evangelicals usually oppose abortion and the death penalty, favor gun control and speak out on behalf of the poor. Example: Tony Campolo.

-- Moderates, a term applied in a broad sense not fully related to its common usage among Southern Baptists, emphasize actions more than belief and freedom more than absolute truth. Although not placing a primary emphasis on doctrine, moderates do embrace most traditional doctrinal boundaries that separate them from liberals. Example: Leaders of most mainline Protestant denominations.

-- Liberals emphasize God's benevolence over his judgment, usually to the point of asserting that all people will be saved in the end or that all religions ultimately lead to the same place. Many liberals do not accept the basic tenets embraced by fundamentalists and evangelicals, such as the virgin birth of Christ and the infallibility of the Bible. Example: Unitarian-Universalists.

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'Fundamentalism' also found on the left

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Fundamentalism is a mindset found among liberals and conservatives alike, according to many who study religious trends in America.

Although "fundamentalist" is a term most often applied to ultra-conservatives, it just as easily could be applied to anyone who is "ultra-" anything, these scholars and social scientists agree.

"I believe that in fundamentalism the spirit and attitude is almost as important as the doctrinal viewpoints," said Leon McBeth, church history professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"There is a liberal who is militant, who is closed-minded, who is not willing to look at alternatives. And while the theological views are completely different, the spirit is twin to the spirit of the fundamentalist," he said.

Timothy Weber, church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., concurred: "Fundamentalism of the left is a form of left-wing separatism or intolerance. It simply is a left-wing version of what is found in certain right-wing circles."

Some scholars even suggest that fundamentalist attitudes can be found in people of all types of doctrinal viewpoints.

"There are lots of other ideologies that are just as hard-nosed and intolerant and willing to draw lines and willing to see the world through only one lens that aren't necessarily on the far right," said Nancy Ammerman, a Baptist sociologist who specializes in religious studies at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

In the case of those of a more liberal persuasion, the irony is that those who preach loudest for tolerance themselves may become intolerant of other viewpoints.

Stan Haste, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists, perhaps the most liberal offshoot of the Southern Baptist Convention in recent years, admits he purposely reminds his group of this fact.

"One of things I choose to do as staff leader of the Alliance from time to time is to remind my own group that we need to live out the precepts of freedom that we claim," Haste explained. "That is to say, we must allow the kind of theological differences, social and political differences that we claim for ourselves."

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Will the real evangelicals please stand up?

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Few American Protestants want to be called fundamentalists or liberals anymore, but it seems almost everyone wants to be classified as an evangelical.

This hasn't always been true. In fact, in the past Southern Baptists have shunned the evangelical label for a variety of reasons but now are among those rushing to claim it.

"Obviously, the word 'liberal' and the word 'fundamentalist' have been demonized," explained Mark Coppenger, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., and a former professor at Wheaton College, an evangelical school in Illinois. "People avoid those labels."

"Evangelical," however, "is one of those labels people like to bear," he said. "When it's an attractive label, you have a lot of folks who like to assume it."

So just what or who is an evangelical?

"An evangelical is a fundamentalist who's not mad at anybody," said Leon McBeth, church history professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"As a historian, I can demonstrate that the new evangelicals originated from the old fundamentalists in an effort to rehabilitate, to overcome the awful, awful public image of fundamentalism," he said. "The evangelicals are fundamentalists once removed and sometimes twice removed."

On the right end of the spectrum today, finding the difference between where the evangelical category begins and the fundamentalist category ends is a matter of subtle degrees, McBeth said. "It's like looking at pastel colors. Sometimes it's hard to know when you've passed from pink to rose."

Classical fundamentalists have embraced the evangelical label in recent years because of the highly negative associations in the press between the word "fundamentalist" and bomb-throwing international terrorists, noted Timothy Weber, church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

In the early days of this century's evangelical movement, evangelicals "went to great lengths to assure fundamentalists they believed the same things, but they believed them in a nicer way," said Weber, who has ties to Fuller Theological Seminary and Denver Seminary, two self-described evangelical schools. "The difference is not so much theological as it is attitudinal."

Evangelicals are "less combative, more open to scholarship and have a much more positive view toward culture in general" than fundamentalists, Weber said. "Evangelicals were not content to remain marginalized. They wanted to enter mainstream American life."

This desire to move into the larger world created a major rift between evangelicals and fundamentalists beginning around the 1940s, Weber said.

"This is what got Billy Graham in trouble," he explained. "He was preaching what they were preaching but throwing his arms wide open and allowing even liberals to support him."

That didn't sit well with true fundamentalists, who insist on maintaining separation from those who claim to be Christian but don't act or believe exactly in the same way as fundamentalists, Weber said.

Thus, the National Association of Evangelicals emerged as an umbrella group about mid-century with the motto: "Cooperation without compromise."

The coalescing of the modern evangelical movement is linked directly to Graham, many scholars assert.

"In American religion, the one most important event of the 20th century has been the rise of Billy Graham," McBeth said. "Billy Graham is the primary catalyst who extricated evangelicalism out of the clutches of old-style fundamentalism. The fundamentalists rejected Graham because they think he's a liberal."

Another distinction between evangelicals and fundamentalists is the subtle difference between calling the Bible "infallible" or "inerrant," said Nancy Ammerman, a Baptist sociologist teaching at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut.

"Fundamentalists differ from evangelicals on being more insistent on inerrancy (a belief that the Bible contains no errors and should be read literally) as the primary way of understanding Scripture," she said. "Evangelicals, while they take Scripture very seriously, are not as united on a certain way of understanding Scripture."

Affirming the Bible as infallible -- meaning trustworthy in all it teaches -- is the basic minimum belief about Scripture to define an evangelical, Weber added. "If you're not willing to call the Bible infallible or in some sense absolutely unique and authoritative, you're probably crossing the line" into liberalism.

The National Association of Evangelicals uses the word "infallible" but not the word "inerrant" in its seven-point statement of belief, yet many of the association's members subscribe to the Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy as well.

The NAE has spent the last three years attempting to define who is an evangelical, said David Melvin, the association's associate director. In the end, a document to be presented at this spring's annual meeting sticks with the current statement of faith, he said.

"There's a lot of diversity, even within the conservative evangelical association which NAE represents," Melvin explained. "When you pull together Reformed Episcopalians and Assembly of God and Mennonite Brethren and others, it's a pretty diverse group."

American Baptist group excludes four churches for pro-gay stance

SACRAMENTO, Calif. (ABP) -- Four American Baptist churches have been thrown out of a regional denominational group for their "welcoming and affirming" stance toward gays.

At a special meeting Jan. 6, delegates of the American Baptist Churches of the West voted 457-127 to exclude four churches, all located in the San Francisco Bay area: San Leandro Community Church, Lakeshore Avenue Baptist Church in Oakland, First Baptist Church in Berkeley and the New Community of Faith congregation in San Jose.

The four churches all belong to the Association of Welcoming and Affirming Baptists, a group of several dozen American Baptist churches involved in outreach to homosexuals. Nationally, there are about 5,800 American Baptist congregations.

American Baptist Churches of the West is one of 34 regional organizations within the 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. It is unclear whether the Jan. 6 vote also negates the churches' membership in the national body, a denominational official told Religion News Service.

Homosexuality has emerged as a hot-button issue for American Baptists, as it has for other mainline groups. Last year, American Baptist churches in Ohio expelled First Baptist Church of Granville because of its openness to gays.

Although the West and Ohio are among the more conservative regional groups, leaders view the issue as potentially divisive for American Baptists nationwide.

Last March, the American Baptist national ministry arm reacted to a pro-homosexual resolution by the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America by severing ties with the peacemaking group. After the Peace Fellowship revised the statement slightly, the ABC's Board of National Ministries reversed that vote last December, restoring ties between the two groups.

The conservative Southern Baptist Convention dealt swiftly with the issue in 1992 when it disfellowshipped two North Carolina churches for affirming homosexuality and amended the SBC constitution to declare any churches which endorse or affirm gays "not in friendly cooperation" with the SBC.

After their ouster, the four churches in California met together for a joint worship service Jan. 7. Joining them was a formerly Southern Baptist congregation, Dolores Street Baptist Church in San Francisco, which had been seeking admission into the ABC of the West but is now excluded by the vote.

"This is a joyous event," said Doug Donley, Dolores Street pastor. "Claiming each other as family is always joyous," he continued, according to a report in the Oakland Tribune.

Dolores Street, which was at one time funded by the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, has a long history of support for gays. The congregation severed ties with the SBC in 1992 to protest the convention's anti-gay stance.

A 1993 arson at the church caused \$2 million damage, destroying Dolores Street's historic sanctuary. The fire was a hate crime directed at the church's gay and lesbian members, a member of the church said at the joint service Jan. 7.

According to Religion News Service, an American Baptist spokesman said questions remain concerning the status of the expelled congregations.

The spokesman, Richard Schramm, said the national church, headquartered in Valley Forge, Pa., is looking into whether the congregations can remain within the denomination without the approval of their regional jurisdiction.

"There is some question whether regions can take action to disfellowship unilaterally because of the covenantal agreements that exist between the regions and the national body," he said.

Schramm also said the expulsions have upset some American Baptists who hold dear the traditional Baptist belief in congregational and individual autonomy in matters of faith.

"Many Baptists are caught in the middle on this issue," he said in an interview. "They would disagree with the acceptance of homosexuality but would defend to the death the right of these churches to express their belief in the rightness of their path."

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-- By Bob Allen. Religion News Service's Ira Rifken contributed to this story.

Supreme Court rejects challenge to public school condom policy

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court rebuffed an effort by a group of parents and students to halt a school district's policy offering condoms to junior- and senior-high-school students in Falmouth, Mass.

Justices offered no rationale Jan. 8 when they refused to review a ruling by the Supreme Judicial Court of Massachusetts that upheld the Falmouth school district's policy. The district set up its condom-availability program in 1992 in an effort to combat AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases.

The Falmouth program made condoms available free of charge to junior- and senior-high-school students who asked for them. In addition condom-vending machines were installed in high-school restrooms.

Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice advanced the case for the parents, who claimed the policy violated their rights to control the education and upbringing of their children, as well as their rights to free exercise of religion.

The Massachusetts court rejected both claims.

The court acknowledged that the Constitution protects the liberty interests of parents in raising their children as they see fit. But, because the Falmouth policy is voluntary, it does not unconstitutionally violate parental liberties, the court said. Parents remain free, the court noted, to instruct their children not to participate.

The court also said the parents failed to show that the condom policy "substantially burdened" their religious liberty.

While the Constitution protects the free exercise of religion, the court reasoned, it does not require government to tailor public-school programs to meet the individual religious preferences of parents.

Jay Sekulow, the ACLJ's chief counsel, called the court's refusal to review the case disappointing.

"To permit a school district to override the desires of parents who oppose condom use for their children clearly sends the wrong message to school officials who should respect the desires of parents, not oppose them," Sekulow said.

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Baptist Peace Fellowship names three to staff

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Baptist Peace Fellowship announced three new staff appointments, coinciding with a relocation of the organization's offices.

Two of the hirings replace people who chose not to make the move from Memphis, Tenn., to the new headquarters in Lake Junaluska, N.C. The other fills a position that was previously vacant.

According to a news release, Pat Parker of Atlanta will become full-time associate director, filling a job that has been vacant for a year. She has worked in marketing and business management and in social work. She is a 1994 seminary graduate who was ordained in 1995 by Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.

Steve Jacobsen of Lewisburg, Pa., has been hired as business manager, replacing Carole Bishop Thais, who will remain in Memphis with her family. An American Baptist, he has been a high-school science teacher and a volunteer missionary.

David Teague of Raleigh, N.C., becomes associate editor of Baptist Peacemaker, the Baptist Peace Fellowship journal. He is currently a free-lance writer with more than 10 years of experience as a newspaper reporter and administrator of a seminary news office. Teague succeeds Paula Womack, who now is a case manager for Summit House in Raleigh, N.C., an alternative-to-prison program for female offenders with children.

The three new staff members will join Executive Director Ken Sehested at the organization's new offices. The move, approved last year by the organization's board of directors, is scheduled Jan. 20.

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-- By ABP staff

Mercer theology school adds faculty member

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Georgia Baptist evangelism director Ron Johnson has been added to the faculty of the new Mercer University School of Theology, Dean Alan Culpepper announced Jan. 10.

Johnson, 46, will be associate professor of evangelism at the theology school scheduled to open in Atlanta this fall.

Since 1993, Johnson has directed the evangelism department of the 1.2 million-member Georgia Baptist Convention. Before that he taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., and was on staff at the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board in Atlanta.

Culpepper called Johnson "one of the leading Baptist strategists in the area of evangelism" whose appointment "says unequivocally that Mercer is interested in healthy, growing churches that are reaching people for Christ."

Johnson is the fourth full-time faculty member to be elected to the new theology school. The appointments of professors Loyd Allen, Paul Duke and Nancy deClaiss-Walford were announced last fall.

Johnson is a graduate of West Georgia College and Southern Seminary, where he earned a doctor of ministry degree. He is currently working on a Th.D. degree through the University of South Africa. He has written three books. He and his wife, Janice, have three children.

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-- By ABP staff

Poll says support for death penalty not influenced by religious views

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Religious beliefs make little difference in whether a person supports the death penalty, according to the Gallup Poll.

A nationwide survey of American adults found that 77 percent favor the death penalty. Among those who say religion is very important in their lives, 75 percent favor the death penalty. That compares with 69 percent support for the death penalty among adults who consider religion not very important in their lives.

The group that is most likely to favor the death penalty is American adults who consider religion fairly important in their lives. Among this group, 84 percent favor the death penalty.

"Although some church leaders and denominations are in the vanguard of those who oppose the death penalty, religion does not appear to have much influence upon opinions concerning it," the Gallup organization reported in its monthly newsletter Emerging Trends.

Overall public support for the death penalty hit its highest point in 1994, with 80 percent of all American adults favoring it. The low point for public support of the death penalty was in 1966, when only 42 percent favored it.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

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