

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Message is sacred, not methods, Warren tells communicators**

By Mark Wyatt

GLORIETA, N.M. (ABP) -- Church health will replace church growth as the next hot issue for congregations, California mega-church pastor Rick Warren told a gathering of Baptist communicators March 7.

"The issue of the 21st century is going to be church health," said Warren, senior pastor of Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, Calif.

Warren said while healthy churches will inevitably grow, many churches and their leaders have confused growth with health. "Bigger is not better," Warren declared, "better is better."

Warren delivered the keynote address at the Baptist Public Relations Association's 1996 workshop March 7-10 at the Glorieta Baptist Conference Center in New Mexico.

Since its beginning in 1980 with seven members, Saddleback Valley Community Church has grown to an average weekly worship attendance of 12,000, making it the fastest-growing Southern Baptist church in history.

Warren told communicators that church health results when the five purposes of the church -- worship, ministry, evangelism, fellowship and discipleship -- are kept in balance. And when that happens, he said, growth occurs.

"When the church of Jesus Christ is balanced it is healthy, and when it is healthy it grows," he explained. "If a church is healthy, growth is automatic. Balance makes a healthy church."

That includes keeping "a balance between methods and message," Warren said. He urged Baptist communicators and churches alike to "use technology but don't worship it."

However, Warren observed, "That's not the problem in most churches. Most are 10 years behind. They're just discovering fax machines."

Warren described a number of ways Saddleback uses technology in its ministries today, such as providing silent pagers to summon parents of pre-schoolers without disrupting worship services and issuing bar-coded identification cards to make sure children are returned to their proper guardians.

Staying current with technology helps churches and individuals by increasing communication, saving time and effectively shortening distances between people, Warren said. "With e-mail I am often as close with people who are great distances away as I am with someone in the next office," he explained.

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But he warned against using technology without a purpose. And he said most people make two mistakes concerning technology which "can be fatal to industry, to denominations" and to individuals.

"We either worship it or fear it -- one or the other," Warren said. The root of both errors about technology is confusing the message with the method, he continued.

"Some people worship technology, but technology's never going to save anybody," Warren declared. "Technology must always be the servant of the church and always be the servant of ministry, not vice versa," he cautioned. The church must "be very aware of not letting the tail wag the dog," he added.

"That's why (at Saddleback) we're not going on TV and radio," Warren stated. Besides, he added, he just wants to be a pastor -- not a fund-raiser or a celebrity. "Always being in the spotlight blinds you, it's bad for your character," Warren said.

Many Baptist churches, however, fear or resent technology, Warren said.

"Many of our churches, really in our heart of hearts, believe the 1950s was the 'golden age of church growth' and they're going to do everything they can to preserve it," Warren observed. But he said such a view is "dishonest" because its proponents try to create a biblical basis for a personal bias.

"It is a human habit of nature that we erect theological walls to protect human preferences," he stated.

"I admire the Amish because they're honest about it. They believe the ideal culture was the mid-1800s and they don't make any bones about it," Warren said. In contrast, he suggested, some Baptists "say we've still got to do the programs of the '60s because it's the New Testament way."

"No method was meant to last forever. No method has lasted for ever. Methods are not sacred, the message is," he declared. Consequently, Warren stressed, while the gospel message must never change, methods of sharing it have to change with every generation.

As an example, Warren cited church music, which he predicted "is going to be the fault line in churches in the next 10 years." Music "divides generations," Warren said, and pervades people's lives. "America's favorite pastime is not baseball, it's talking about music," he asserted.

In Saddleback's early days, the worship service featured music that "went from Bach to rock" and offended just about everybody, Warren recalled. From that experience, Warren came to realize that each church has to develop its own style of worship.

"You have to specialize. You tell me the music you're using and I'll tell you who you're reaching and who you're never going to reach," he said.

"When we do not change methods we in essence cut off the message, and that's called being unfaithful," Warren said. "Most people define faithfulness in terms of orthodox belief. Jesus always measured faithfulness in terms of behavior."

Warren encouraged church leaders to try new things and be willing to risk failure while striving for success. "If you're not taking any risks in your ministry, you don't need any faith," he said.

In a business session, Baptist communicators voted to change the name of their organization to Baptist Communicators Association. "Communicators" more accurately describes the organization's membership than the more narrow "public relations" term in the old title, said Michael Dudit, who chaired a study committee which recommended the change.

At an awards ceremony, the group honored members with top awards in four categories.

Mark Sandlin of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board won the Fon H. Scofield Award for exceptional achievement in publication photography.

Trish Landers Ragsdale at the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board won the M.E. Dodd Award for video production.

Rachel Gill at the Home Mission Board received the Frank Burkhalter Award for writing.

The 1995 Albert McClellan Award for print and media design went to Rebecca Woosley at Palm Beach Atlantic College in Palm Beach, Fla.

## Senate voucher opponents turn back funding measure

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Vermont senator says he will propose a stop-gap measure to fund the District of Columbia as debate over a controversial private-school-voucher provision continues to delay a vote on a Senate appropriation bill.

On March 5, senators voted 53-43 to end debate on the D.C. funding bill, seven votes short of the 60 votes needed to force a vote. It was the third victory in a week for opponents to a provision in the bill that would provide federal money for vouchers to attend private and parochial schools.

The District of Columbia has yet to receive \$219 million still due from the federal government. D.C.'s chief financial officer has said the district will run out of money if a spending measure is not passed immediately.

Sen. James Jeffords, R-Vt., said he would attempt to fund D.C. through a stop-gap spending measure.

"Clearly there are provisions in the conference agreement that are not acceptable to a significant minority of the Senate," Jeffords said.

Congress routinely approves stop-gap bills, called continuing resolutions, to fund federal programs for which regular appropriations bills have not been passed.

The continuing resolution currently funding federal agencies expires March 15. Congress and the president must approve another spending measure by then to prevent a third government shutdown this fiscal year.

The House of Representatives narrowly approved a stop-gap spending bill March 7 that provides no funds for D.C. A spokesman for a House appropriations committee said the House leadership did not want to support a D.C. funding measure without the voucher provision.

A spokesman for a Senate appropriations panel said the Senate is expected to consider a stop-gap spending measure that funds D.C. but does not contain the voucher provision. The measure could be taken up as early as March 12. Any difference between the House and Senate bill would have to be resolved in a conference committee.

The voucher provision would provide \$5 million that the D.C. Council could allocate between two types of scholarships.

Voucher opponents said it would be the first federally funded private school voucher program in the nation's history.

One scholarship would be used to pay tuition for eligible institutions including private and parochial schools. A second "enhanced achievement scholarship" would be used for non-sectarian programs that help students who have academic trouble.

The House-passed stop-gap bill includes a provision that would allow states to refuse Medicaid funds to pay for abortions in cases of rape and incest. An attempt to delete the provision was defeated.

The measure contains \$3.3 billion of an additional \$8 billion sought by President Clinton for education and the environment but only if cutbacks in certain entitlement programs are enacted.

## House Republicans announce plans for 'community renewal' legislation

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Several U.S. House Republicans have announced plans to introduce legislation that would provide tax incentives, private and parochial-school tuition payments and vouchers for "faith-based" drug programs in low-income communities.

Community leaders and several House Republicans were present at a Feb. 27 announcement, including Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich of Georgia. Reps. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma and James Talent of Missouri drafted the legislative package after several meetings with community leaders discussing possible programs.

The congressmen hope to introduce the legislation before lawmakers break for Easter.

Watts said the Great Society programs of the 1960s have only extended the "downward spiral" of low-income families. "It is people that change lives, not programs," Watts said.

Gingrich called for a new approach to strengthening communities and said it must be based on one person helping one person at a time. He said the renewal plan will give citizens the right to pick the charities they believe in, not the ones the government believes in.

A provision would give individuals a tax credit equal to 75 percent of the value of donations to charities that serve low-income people.

Gingrich applauded efforts to fund religious schools and social programs.

"If you don't start with a faith-based approach, you aren't starting," Gingrich said. He added that "all social work in the end is mission work."

If a community meets outlined criteria and guidelines, it would be a candidate to be one of up to 100 "renewal communities."

Businesses and individuals within "renewal communities" would enjoy certain capital gains exclusions and a tax credit would be put in place to offset the cost of hiring individuals who need some type of vocational rehabilitation.

Supporters of the legislation acknowledged that the communities would have to subscribe to some regulations to qualify. The state and local governments overseeing the communities must agree to participate in the low-income "scholarship" program provided for in the legislation.

Public funds would be used to cover the "reasonable" cost of transportation to alternative public schools or to provide scholarships to pay for tuition to private and religious schools.

The minimum value of the vouchers would not fall below the lesser of two-thirds of the cost of educating a child in a public school or the tuition charged by the private school.

The measure would also provide vouchers for drug treatment and counseling services administered by religious institutions. A summary of the bill from its sponsors says, "Funds may be used for drug counseling and rehabilitation programs which have a religious content and character."

A church-state specialist warned that religious institutions should be wary of strings attached to government funding.

"This proposed legislation offers a classic illustration of the 'He who pays the fiddler calls the tune' scenario," said James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee. "Why any church or religious institution would knowingly accept being hog-tied by more government regulations, I don't know," he added.

A spokeswoman for Watts said the package's intent is to remove strings and allow faith-based groups to get around government obstacles, which she said were hindering their ability to counsel and help as many people.

## U.S. Supreme Court rejects complaint against sexually explicit AIDS program

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The nation's highest court has refused to hear arguments that a sexually explicit AIDS awareness presentation violated parental and religious-liberty rights of two Massachusetts high school students and their parents.

Without comment, the U.S. Supreme Court refused March 4 to review lower court actions dismissing the complaint.

Students Jason Mesiti and Shannon Silva attended a mandatory assembly at Chelmsford High School in 1992 that featured a 90-minute presentation by Suzi Landolphi, owner of Hot, Sexy and Safer Productions Inc.

The students and their parents, Ronald and Suzanne Brown and Carol and Richard Dubreuil, filed suit seeking declaratory and monetary relief. The suit alleged that the school program violated their privacy rights, due-process rights and rights to free exercise of religion.

The lawsuit also charged that the program violated federal civil-rights law by creating a sexually hostile education environment.

The lawsuit alleged that the program featured sexually explicit monologues and sexually suggestive skits and that Landolphi, among other things, "advocated and approved oral sex, masturbation, homosexual activity and condom use during promiscuous premarital sex."

Defendants in the suit included Landolphi and her firm, Chelmsford public school officials and leaders of the Chelmsford Parent Teacher Organization, who initiated contacts with Hot, Sexy and Safer.

A federal district court dismissed the complaint in March 1995, an action affirmed in October by the 1st U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

The appeals court said that while failing to provide opt-out procedures may have "displayed a certain callousness toward the sensibilities of minors," the school's actions did not rise to the level of "conscience shocking" behavior.

The right of parents to direct the upbringing of their children does not encompass dictating curriculum at a public school attended by their children, the appeals court said.

Otherwise, the court said, "the schools would be forced to cater a curriculum for each student whose parents had genuine moral disagreements with the schools' choice subject matter."

The Constitution does not provide a "broad-based right to restrict the flow of information in the public schools," the court said.

The appeals court also rejected the lawsuit's assertion that the program's alleged "endorsement and encouragement of sexual promiscuity at a mandatory assembly" violated the plaintiffs' free-exercise rights and that it created a sexually hostile education environment.

The court said a landmark 1972 ruling did not apply in this case. In *Wisconsin v. Yoder*, the high court invalidated the application of Wisconsin's compulsory attendance law to Amish parents, who refused on religious grounds to send their children to school past the eighth grade.

The student and parent plaintiffs in this case, the court said, did not allege that the one-time compulsory attendance at the AIDS program threatened their "way of life."

In their brief urging the Supreme Court to reject the appeal, defendants in the lawsuit noted that no students were "required to do anything other than attend and listen" and that after the assembly, school officials took steps to ensure that the district's opt-out policy for such programs would be followed in the future.

## Fired government employee wins religion-in-the-work place dispute

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- An Iowa county has failed to convince the U.S. Supreme Court to uphold the 1990 firing of a departmental supervisor dismissed in part because of his on-the-job religious activities.

Without comment, the high court refused March 4 to review a federal appeals court decision siding with Isaiah Brown in his lawsuit against Polk County officials.

Brown was director of data processing services for the county when officials ordered him to quit witnessing and proselytizing on the job and to remove religious articles from his office. He later was reprimanded for a lack of judgment regarding the budget and because department employees were found to be using office computers for personal use. Two weeks after that reprimand in late 1990, he was fired after refusing to resign.

Brown, an African-American, charged that the county's actions had violated both a federal civil-rights law banning racial and religious discrimination in the work place and his First Amendment right to freely exercise his religion.

A federal district court and a three-judge panel of the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled against Brown, a self-described "born again Christian." But the full appeals court partially reversed those decisions, finding that Brown was fired in part for religious reasons and that the county had unconstitutionally violated his religious freedom.

Title VII of the Civil Rights Act requires employers to accommodate the religious practices of workers unless to do so would result in an "undue hardship" on the employer.

Brown's directing a secretary to type his Bible study notes and use of his office for before-work prayer meetings were not protected by the civil-rights law, the appeals court said.

But the appeals court said the county failed to prove it would encounter a hardship by accommodating voluntary prayers during office meetings or a biblical reference made by Brown during only one meeting.

The appeals court concluded that the county offered inadequate proof it would have fired Brown apart from the religious activities it challenged.

The appeals court also agreed with Brown's First Amendment challenge.

County officials could legitimately prohibit intimidating or harassing religious activity, the appeals court said. But the broad order requiring Brown to cease all activities that could be viewed as "religious proselytizing, witnessing, or counseling" exhibited a "hostility to religion that our Constitution simply prohibits."

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-- By Larry Chesser

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