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Southern Baptists respond to floods in Northwest

By Bob Allen

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists in the Northwest quickly mobilized disaster-relief efforts to aid victims of the region's worst floods in 40 years.

Floods hit five Northwestern states the first week in January.

Snow and rain were blamed for at least 23 deaths in California, Washington, Oregon, Idaho and Nevada. Across the five-state region, an estimated 15,000 homes were destroyed. Mudslides closed several highways.

President Clinton declared disaster areas in large parts of the region.

About 125,000 Californians were forced from their homes. As much as 40 inches of rain fell on the area, accompanied by heavy melting of snow from the Sierra Nevada mountains.

Vineyards and orchards were destroyed in California's agricultural Central Valley. Experts predicted it would be the most costly flooding in California history. Preliminary estimates set damages at \$775 million.

The American Red Cross opened up 88 shelters in five states, CNN reported, including 60 in northern California.

In Sutter County, California, Southern Baptists served nearly 35,000 meals through Jan. 7 from two mobile units stationed at a shelter with 6,500 displaced persons at Sutter High School, said Don Hargis, disaster-relief director for the California Southern Baptist Convention. They also serviced a nearby Air Force base with 3,500 meals.

As people began returning to their homes, the flood's crest moved south. Hargis said he expected another unit to be dispatched farther south.

As the feeding operation winds down, Hargis estimated as many as 500 Baptist volunteers would be sought for weekends and 100 during the week for "mucking up" operations.

Gary Floyd, ministry director for the Northwest Baptist Convention, said flooding in southern Oregon was the worst in 40 to 50 years. About 15 volunteers served 800 meals a day from a mobile kitchen owned by Juniper

Baptist Association in Ashland, where flooding knocked out a water-treatment plant, leaving 18,000 residents without tap water. Floyd said the number of meals would likely increase to 1,500 to 2,000 after flood waters crested Jan. 6.

The floods in Ashland rushed from mountains in northern California into lower-lying southern Oregon, Floyd said. Earlier, much of the state was plagued by a series of heavy rains since late November, he said, noting that at least two Southern Baptist churches in Oregon have been damaged from flooding in recent weeks.

Southwest of Eugene, the sanctuary at First Baptist Church in Drain, Ore., was flooded when a nearby creek left its banks, Floyd said. Farther north, near Portland, First Baptist Church of Beaverton received about \$10,000 in damage to classrooms located below ground-level when community storm drains backed up, he said.

In Nevada, waters from heavy rains and melting snow ran four feet deep on city streets in Reno, inundating wedding chapels and temporarily closing many casinos, according to news reports.

Mike McCullough, editor of the Nevada Baptist newspaper, said he knew of no damage to Nevada Baptist church buildings. "We're grateful that none of our churches ended up under water," he said.

Volunteers from at least 13 Baptist congregations in Nevada set up operations to feed flood victims or help with cleanup. By Sunday, Jan. 5, volunteers had served more than 4,000 meals, and were expected to stay in place for a week.

Living Water Community Church, a Southern Baptist congregation in Cedarville, Calif., fed rescue workers and offered temporary shelter to families displaced by heavy flooding, said Terry Marzuola, whose husband, Conrad, is the church's bivocational pastor.

The church was started about three years ago by Gerlach/Empire Community Church, a Southern Baptist church in a small gypsum-mining town in Nevada 100 miles north of Reno.

When a former bar went out of business and went up for sale for back taxes, the church in Empire donated its own building fund so the Living Water mission could buy it, she said. The building was renovated to house the church and a teen center and the congregation is now growing rapidly, she said.

At Sunday's worship services, church members said they felt blessed to be spared from widespread damage in the small farming community. A mudslide hit one church member's garage and then formed a small dam that protected the house from waters. "It definitely was the hand of God," Marzuola said.

While grateful to have escaped the worst, she said church members felt for neighbors who were less fortunate. "It's just a devastating thing to see," she said.

The church's ministry to flood victims and rescue workers "certainly was a witness to the community," she said.

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Disaster relief to retain high profile in restructuring, Williams says

By Bob Allen

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (ABP) -- In the last decade, disaster relief has grown into one of the most visible ministries of Southern Baptists, says James Williams, president of the Southern Baptist Convention Brotherhood Commission.

And that will not change when the Memphis, Tenn.,-based commission which coordinates nationally the work of some 10,000 trained and certified disaster-relief volunteers is phased out next summer in a denominational restructuring, he pledged.

Southern Baptists have been working directly in disaster-relief ministries for 29 years, Williams said. In the last decade, however, the denomination has come to be regarded as indispensable in disaster response by both the government and relief organizations such as the American Red Cross.

In a report two years ago, the Red Cross noted that of 129 recent national disasters identified by the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Southern Baptists had responded to 124 and had prepared 80 percent of the 18 million meals served at Red Cross disaster-relief centers.

"We think that represents some of the best PR the Southern Baptist Convention has had in recent years," Williams said.

From a ministry standpoint, Williams called disaster relief "a tremendous opportunity to radically demonstrate the power of the gospel."

"It's ministering first of all to people in need," he said. "When you demonstrate the kind of love that represents, it arouses curiosity," noting that many disaster-relief volunteers report leading individuals to accept Christ as savior while they minister.

The Brotherhood Commission coordinates nationally the work of 62 mobile disaster-relief units owned by Baptist state conventions, associations and local churches. The commission is being phased out next summer in a merger with two other SBC agencies. Williams said, however, that the role of disaster relief will not be diminished in the new North American Mission Board.

"Disaster relief will be one of the key ministries of the North American Mission Board," he said.

Disaster relief "will have a vital role" at the new agency, Williams said, adding he hopes it might even be enlarged in the new staff structure.

"Certainly, I have no question in my mind about the future place of disaster relief ministries," he said.

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Clinton seeks religious leaders' help on welfare and immigration issues

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- President Bill Clinton called on churches to help implement welfare-reform provisions by providing jobs for able-bodied welfare recipients.

At a White House breakfast for 100 religious leaders Jan. 6 -- the fourth ecumenical breakfast of his presidency -- Clinton also asked religious leaders to work to help change what he said were unfair cuts in aid to legal immigrants in the welfare package signed into law last year.

Clinton said some religious leaders probably thought he made a mistake signing the recent welfare-reform legislation, but he defended the bill, which ends a guarantee of federal aid to the poor.

He also promoted a provision in the new welfare laws which some of the religious leaders oppose, saying it violates the First Amendment's ban against government-established religion.

"This new law gives every state the right to give the welfare check to an employer, including a church, as an employment and training subsidy, who will hire someone from welfare," Clinton said. "If every church in America just hired one family, the welfare problem would go way down," he added.

Concerning welfare, he said, "What I long for is a system of community-based support for people who are out of work through no fault of their own, but a system of community-based norms that require people who can work to work when there is work."

Hugh Tobias, senior minister at Trinity Baptist Church in Madison, Ala., said he liked much of what he heard from Clinton but suggested that the president's idea to let states provide checks for churches to hire people off welfare "needs to be thought through some more."

Clinton sounded themes of unity and common ground and spent nearly two hours fielding questions and engaging in discussions with the leaders.

"We have devised a system -- we have nurtured and maintained it now for 200 years -- in which people can reconcile their differences and come to a consensus and an agreement which will push the country forward," Clinton said. "So we are enlarged when we come to agreement after honest debate in the right way. We are diminished if, in the way we treat each other, we preclude the possibility of resolution and going forward," he added.

Several Baptists were among the religious leaders at the event which Clinton noted took place on Epiphany, the day in the Christmas tradition when gifts were brought to the baby Jesus.

Brian Harbour, pastor of First Baptist Church in Richardson, Texas, and Clinton's former pastor in Little Rock, Ark., said Clinton emphasized the need for respect in the midst of diversity. "It is becoming more evident what I have known for years since I was his pastor -- that he is a committed Christian man whose faith influences and energizes everything he does."

Jimmy Allen, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention said, "I saw a confident leader seriously engaging in how to pull people together, particularly with respect to welfare issues and making us aware that all of us are immigrants."

However, Will Dodson, director of government relations for the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission, said Clinton's plea to religious leaders to minister to the poor and foster reconciliation did not go far enough.

"We can never agree to focus only upon those issues on which most people agree but ignore other critical issues simply because they are divisive," Dodson told Baptist Press. "It would be wrong for the church to ignore addressing divisive issues such as the sanctity of human life and sexual immorality in its many forms out of fear that doing so will offend a large segment of our society."

Cooperation and reconciliation do not mean churches must compromise their mission to confront sin, Dodson insisted. "If we care about a lost and dying world and a society which at its core needs to repent of its sin and turn to God, then that is the message that we must proclaim."

Clinton told the leaders his administration had worked to cut down on illegal immigration but legal immigration had served the nation well by making it more diverse.

"America is not a white and black America," he said. "America is a country with scores, hundreds of different racial, ethnic and religious groups."

"Against the background of what you see in Bosnia, Rwanda, Northern Ireland, the Middle East, all of these things, these destructive impulses people have, how can we prove in America that we can all get along -- without giving up our basic beliefs but in finding a ground of mutual respect?" Clinton asked. "It seems to me that that may be the single most significant decision facing the United States," he added.

Among other Baptist leaders at the event were: Joan Brown Campbell, general secretary of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U.S.A.; Tony Campolo, sociologist and director of the Urban Studies Program at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa.; Wayne Dehoney, former president of the Southern Baptist Convention; James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee; Rex Horne, pastor of Immanuel Baptist Church in Little Rock, Ark., where Clinton is a member; Bennett Smith, president of the Progressive National Baptist Convention; and Elaine Smith, president of the American Baptist Churches U.S.A.

Clinton concluded by quoting Chicago Roman Catholic Cardinal Joseph Bernardin, who died in November after a long bout with pancreatic cancer, who in his last speech said "the precious gift of time should not be wasted on acrimony and division."

Clinton made a final plea to the leaders to help him on the welfare and immigration issues and in "creating a sense of reconciliation, the right sort of spirit in which we can deal with these issues."

Louisiana appeals court upholds refusal to dismiss professors' suit

ALEXANDRIA, La. (ABP) -- An appeals court has upheld a judge's refusal to dismiss a defamation suit filed by four Louisiana College professors.

The suit charges that defendants Leon Hyatt and the Louisiana Baptist Conservative Resurgency group he leads defamed professors at the Baptist school in Pineville in derogatory letters published in a 1995 pamphlet. The plaintiffs are professors Carlton Winberry, Frederick Downing, James Heath and Connie Douglas.

Hyatt's attorney, Dale Smith, filed a motion asking that the suit be dismissed based on religious freedom protected by the First Amendment. District Judge Tom Yeager denied Smith's request in a ruling last July, saying religious freedom was not an issue because the lawsuit did not involve internal matters of a church.

Louisiana's 3rd Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that Yeager did not err in denying the defendants' request to dismiss the lawsuit, the Alexandria (La.) Daily Towntalk reported Jan. 7.

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-- By ABP staff

Helping less-fortunate people appeals to American teenagers

By Marv Knox

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- The way to a teen's soul is through her heart.

The key to attracting the largest majority of American young people to church is to ask them to help less-fortunate people, the Gallup Youth Survey discovered.

Serving the needs of others appeals to 80 percent of teens polled by the Gallup organization's Princeton Religion Research Center and reported in the latest issue of its "Emerging Trends" newsletter.

Twenty percent of teens said they currently are involved in "church-sponsored activities to help less-fortunate people." Sixty percent claimed they would like to be involved in that kind of religious activity. And 68 percent of teens who "have not been attracted to attend church recently" said they would like to participate.

The 80 percent favorable rating for service to others far outpaced other church activities aimed at teens.

-- A church youth group other than Sunday school is the next-biggest draw, teens said. Sixty-two percent indicated they either are now involved (36 percent) or would like to be involved (26 percent) in such a ministry.

Youth groups are "a prominent part of the teen social scene in the South, where a majority of young people belong to them," the Gallup pollsters reported.

And youth groups are more attractive to girls than boys, they added. Forty-two percent of girls attend youth groups, compared to 31 percent of boys.

-- Sunday school or a Bible study group is attractive to slightly more than half of American teens, they told the pollsters. Fifty-four percent said they either are now involved (33 percent) or would like to be involved (21 percent) in weekly study of Scripture.

Sunday school attendance declines as teens age, the survey found. Thirty-seven percent of youth age 13 to 15 said they attend Sunday school, compared to 27 percent of teens 16 and older.

-- Choirs and music groups are attractive to less than four in 10 teens surveyed. Thirty-eight percent said they either currently participate (13 percent) or would like to participate (25 percent) in a church music group.

Music groups are twice as attractive to African-American teens (24 percent) as whites (11), and Hispanics

(7 percent) are less-interested. Females in choirs outnumber males by more than two-to-one (18 percent to 8 percent).

Youth participation in church activities appears to be a key to maintaining their involvement in church later in life, the pollsters theorized. Noting Roman Catholics "have been losing followers as they grow older," the newsletter states: "In the formative teen-age years, Protestants are far more likely to participate in church-centered activities. They are three times as likely as Catholics to be attending Sunday school, and twice as likely to participate in youth groups, choirs or church-sponsored charitable activities."

The survey also found a connection between church involvement and academic success. "Students who are doing above-average work at high school (are) twice as likely as those who are just average or below average to join the various church-sponsored youth groups and activities," the pollsters reported.

In a companion study, the survey found that going to church is a good way for adults to impress teens.

Eighty-one percent of teens said going to church makes adults more attractive to them, while only 13 percent said church-going causes adults to be less attractive.

Conversely, the survey revealed radio and television are not particularly effective ways to reach teens.

Nationwide, only 38 percent of teens said they had watched any religious programs on TV or listened to religious programs on the radio.

Fifty percent of teens in the South answered the TV/radio question positively, compared to the East (23 percent), Midwest (37 percent) and West (38 percent).

A majority of African-American teens (65 percent) said they take in religious programs, a ratio almost twice that of whites and Hispanics (33 percent each).

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Teens sound 4 cries for help, expert says

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Facing a turbulent, uncertain future, today's teens are sounding four cries for help, a youth-ministry expert told a gathering of youth leaders.

Walt Mueller, founder of the Center for Parent and Youth Understanding, spoke on "Understanding Today's Youth Culture" at a nationwide meeting of youth leaders late last year in St. Louis. His remarks were reported in "NetFax," a facsimile newsletter published by Leadership Network, based in Tyler, Texas.

Youths' cries, Mueller said, relate to:

-- The changing family.

The family traditionally has been the strongest cultural force and greatest influence on teens, but the family of today is changing, he told the youth ministers. Divorce impacts an additional 3,000 children per day, and 40 percent of U.S. children will at some time live in a home without a father present.

The home front also is compounded by workaholic parents, sexual abuse, alcoholism and drugs, and the "latchkey" syndrome of children who are at home while both parents work.

The response to the cry of the changing family is to build relationships with youth that are accepting and loving, and that model for them healthy families.

-- Media influence.

The media's influence on today's children is greater than the influence of families, schools, friends and church, Mueller reported. The "average" teen listens to four hours of music per day and will see 23,000 hours of TV by high school graduation.

Consequently, the media provides teens with "maps of reality" as they seek to understand their world, he said. MTV and other media "make it their business to understand the world in which youth live and their issues and concerns."

Christians can respond to this cry by providing youth with understanding and a sense of direction, he urged.
-- Moral relativism.

Youth live in a world where increasingly more people believe absolute truth cannot be known, Mueller said. NetFAX cited a George Barna poll that revealed 60 percent of Americans don't believe in absolute truth.

In that context, youth do not accept moral authority simply because "the Bible says," he reported.

Youth need a response to their cry that clearly but firmly explains truth in language and cultural images that teens understand, he said.

-- Hopelessness.

Many youth today have no hope for the future, as evidenced by projections that up to 20 percent of them will attempt suicide, Mueller noted.

However, teen hopelessness provides the church with a door of opportunity to offer them hope through a relationship to Jesus Christ, he said. "Know and live the word of God, use their culture to communicate with them, build relationships and become more intentional in family ministry."

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-- By Marv Knox

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