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## **Vestal outlines CBF growth plan as leaders struggle with plateau**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- While Cooperative Baptist Fellowship leaders struggled with budget cuts mandated by plateaued growth, the moderate group's new chief executive predicted brighter days.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship was formed in 1991 by disenfranchised moderates to provide alternative missions, education and other church programs to those of the Southern Baptist Convention, which came under conservative control during the 1980s.

In its early years, the Fellowship, which has not formally split from the SBC, grew rapidly, causing Southern Baptist leaders to view it as a threat to traditional denominational giving channels.

Recently, however, growth in dollar amounts and numbers of new churches giving funds to the Fellowship has leveled. The plateau caught Fellowship leaders by surprise. They had budgeted for 20 percent income growth in this year's \$14 million budget. Year-to-date receipts, however, are running only 2 percent ahead of last year and could total no more than \$12.5 million, officials predict.

As a result, talk of an impending budget squeeze dominated a Jan. 30-Feb. 1 meeting of the Fellowship's 84-member Coordinating Council.

In his first report as the Fellowship's coordinator, former Houston pastor Daniel Vestal acknowledged leaders were struggling with finances.

"Let me say in all candor ... the last couple of weeks we've had to do some tough things and make some tough decisions and deal with some realities that are not pleasant and not fun with regard to budget," Vestal said.

Vestal, who was elected last fall to succeed retired coordinator Cecil Sherman, quickly added he is not discouraged by the financial setback.

"Though at present we are facing some hard decisions and some tough challenges, I have great, great enthusiasm about the future of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship ...," he said.

Vestal, who went on the CBF payroll Dec. 1 and moved to Atlanta in early January, said the biggest surprise of the job is his impression of "how far CBF has come in the five or six years since it started."

As a leader in the organization's early days, Vestal recalled a scene of the Fellowship's first "dumpy" office furnished with a table, a chair and a typewriter. Recently, the staff moved into new offices in Mercer University's new theology school building in Atlanta, which council members toured during their meeting.

"I'm overwhelmed, really, when I see how far we've come and how much God has blessed this organization," Vestal said.

Looking to the future, Vestal outlined "a process and a plan for growth" that he said he plans to develop with input from other Fellowship leaders.

As he has developed his ideas, Vestal said he has asked for input from staff, officers and leaders of state and regional Fellowship groups. He asked Coordinating Council members for feedback, pledging to set aside part of the group's April meeting for discussion of his growth strategy.

In describing his growth plan, Vestal stressed networking and partnership with other organizations, contrasting the loosely knit Fellowship to more centralized religious bodies like the SBC.

Rather than viewing the Fellowship in "a pyramid model," Vestal offered a "molecular model," in which numerous networks of Baptist individuals, churches, institutions, organizations and state and regional groups all work toward common goals.

"Each one of those networks connects at a central point and the point at which they touch each other is CBF," Vestal said.

The Fellowship's effectiveness will be enhanced through "partnering" with churches and other organizations, Vestal predicted. "I see the future of the CBF as a partnering network, and that our growth will be by partnering," he said.

Vestal outlined five incentives to encourage churches to partner with the Fellowship, pledging that the organization will provide:

-- A world mission strategy that is "deliberate and focused" on people groups that have little or no access to the gospel.

"I believe that Baptist people want to be involved in a world mission strategy," Vestal said. At first, some moderates coped with denominational controversy by focusing only on their local church. "That may last for a little while, but if you have any religion at all, you realize you can't do that [global missions] by yourself," he said.

-- Resources for "personal and spiritual renewal." "Perhaps the greatest need in today's church is a rediscovery of authentic spirituality," Vestal said. "We're going to help churches learn how to pray and how to live the life of prayer."

-- A "place of encouragement and support in an environment of freedom and trust." "Every one of us needs belonging beyond our families and church families," Vestal said. "We need the blessing of a wider fellowship."

-- Access to information and relationships to help individuals and churches in their ministries. "We live in an information age. Ideas are important. So CBF will provide access to information and ideas that will help Baptist people," he said.

-- Participation in "a process that will shape the Baptist witness for the future." "Together, we will preserve our heritage," he said. "We will articulate Baptist ideas and principles. We will communicate a spirit of what it means to be faithful and free."

"Those five statements are very important in my understanding of our future," Vestal said. "This gets to the heart of what I believe we ought to be. I believe to the degree we do this effectively, we will grow."

Churches relate to the Fellowship in a number of ways, Vestal said. A "CBF-open" church might allow members to designate gifts to the organization. A "CBF-friendly" church might have a large segment of members who support the Fellowship. A "CBF-partner" church supports the Fellowship unabashedly, he said.

All churches, Vestal said, are welcome in the organization. "If they partner with us in one way, I'm going to celebrate that. If they partner with us, I'm not going to tell them they can't partner with anyone else."

Asked about the Fellowship's relationship to the Southern Baptist Convention, Vestal said churches are free to relate to multiple organizations in many ways. "My feeling is we don't have to project competition with the SBC any more than we do with Campus Crusade for Christ or the Baptist World Alliance," he said.

Asked about beginning new churches, Vestal said he expected the partner organization Friends of New Churches to continue to take the lead in establishing new Fellowship-friendly congregations.

"I don't see CBF starting new churches because we are not a pyramid structure," he said. "I hope I see Friends of New Churches encouraging churches to start churches. I hope in their network they would connect with us and we would be part of that."

Will Carter, who leads the 2-year-old Friends of New Churches network, said the group numbers more than 80 new churches and predicted more could be started with help from established Fellowship congregations.

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## **SBC a large convention of small churches, study says**

By Marv Knox

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The typical Southern Baptist goes to an atypical church, according to a recent study. While most churches in the Southern Baptist Convention are small, the majority of Southern Baptists attend large churches, according to a recent SBC Home Mission Board study.

The median Southern Baptist church has 233 members, with 168 of them living in the community, the study showed. Seventy people attend its Sunday morning worship service, and 55 come to Sunday School. The church baptizes five people a year, and five others also join, but its net growth is only one member.

Statistically speaking, that's typical, but it's not the kind of church most Southern Baptists attend.

Seventy percent of Southern Baptists belong to a church with at least 400 members -- almost twice the size of a typical church. Half of all Southern Baptists belong to churches with 721 or more members. Only one in four Southern Baptist churches is that large.

The 10 percent of SBC churches that have the largest memberships claim from 886 to 28,003 members each, while the smallest 10 percent number one to 59 members each, according to Phil Jones, director of the Home Mission Board's research division. Jones guided the study, which is based on statistics provided by churches for 1995.

The gap in size between the SBC's largest and smallest churches is growing. Not surprisingly, the largest churches baptize the most people and take in the most members in other ways.

Jones titled his report "A Large Convention of Small Churches." The title seems appropriate, especially considering the vast number of tiny congregations.

But having membership skewed toward the largest churches raises profound questions for denominational programmers: Is the SBC a convention of small churches, with a relatively small number of large churches thrown in? Or is it a convention of medium-to-large churches, reflecting where most Southern Baptists go to church?

"I'm trying to look at it from a church perspective, and the majority of our churches are small," Jones said of his report's analysis. "Churches are the primary interest in our denomination. Theoretically, we are a denomination of churches."

However, in an age of limited resources, can the convention promote its programs and sound its appeals equally to all churches? Or will it of necessity direct its emphases to the minority of churches where the majority of Southern Baptists attend?

For the convention to relate evenly to churches up and down the size spectrum, it will have to resist interest- and market-driven temptations, observers report.

"Those who are in charge are programming more and more for the large church; that's what they understand," said a denominational worker who asked not to be identified.

George Bullard, a consultant on "denominational transformation," said Southern Baptists "have got to change our method of approaching" the convention's largest and smallest congregations.

"We've got to empower our large and mega churches to grow and deepen their outreach, and also help our smaller and medium churches to be more highly relational," said Bullard, who is employed by the South Carolina Baptist Convention.

The difference between large and small churches is more than numbers. They operate out of different cultures, said Vernon Cole, director of church growth and administration for the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

That's because most of the convention's largest churches are urban or suburban, while most of the tiniest are rural, said Bill Leonard, a church historian and dean of Wake Forest University's theology school, and Clay Price, research and information services manager for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

In fact, Price feels the differences are so distinct he profiles typical rural and urban churches separately. "It's hard to compare the two," he said, since the demographic forces that shape congregations and often pace their growth or decline are so different in the two areas.

Leonard, whose specialty is American church history, said cultural forces at work in the nation may continue to propel large, innovative urban/suburban churches while crimping smaller, rural churches.

"We see the urbanization that's consistent with the whole culture. We see a decline of the rural style, the rural ethos," he said. "Most of our services were built around the rural church -- worship at 11 (a.m.) and 7 (p.m.) and revivals" twice a year.

"Things are changing radically," in American church life, Leonard said. "The future is going to have significantly different implications for associations, for hiring pastors, for doing church and relating among the churches."

Concerning future pastors, Leonard, who has taught would-be ministers for two decades, noted, "We have a whole generation who have no frame of reference for the little churches." Most young ministers grew up in medium and large churches and have absolutely no experience with small congregations, he added.

"The small church is totally different than the middle or larger church," Cole added. "In a small church, they 'are' church before they 'do' church. In the middle and larger churches, they 'do' church, and in the process they 'become' church."

But being a successful pastor in a small church requires understanding the "family" dynamics of an intimate community, which can be foreign to a young pastor who grew up worshipping with several hundred people, he said.

As trends continue, and financial pressures build up on smaller churches, increasing numbers of congregations may need to consider hiring bivocational pastors, Leonard noted.

Or three or four congregations -- a "field of churches" -- might team up to call one pastor among them, Bullard added.

That concept won't be tied exclusively to little churches, Leonard said. "Because of declining resources, many associations -- particularly rural associations of small churches -- know their next director of missions may have to be part-time or shared."

Still, the convention must work to strengthen associations, Bullard said. He noted churches with 225 or fewer in average attendance tend to look most directly to their association for programming help, while larger churches tend to look to their state convention or the national convention.

That help for smaller churches -- channeled through the association or otherwise -- should be geared to helping pastors, Bullard said, noting, "If anything happens, it's up to him."

At the other end of the size spectrum, some of the largest urban/suburban churches "sense that they don't need the denomination in the way the smaller churches do," Leonard said. "Some are like mini-denominations. They

can do in one congregation what all those little congregations used to have to pool their resources to do in a denomination."

"We've got to help the mega churches see their role and responsibility," Bullard urged.

The breadth of the size spectrum presents challenges to a denomination that wants to keep all the churches in the fold. But the changes don't spell doom for small churches, which are the spiritual homes to many Southern Baptists, even those who now belong to larger congregations, the experts said.

"People have been predicting the demise of the small church for decades, but they are like a cat; they have nine lives," Cole said. "Because of the strength of their family nature, it takes a lot to kill one."

"The small churches still can be models of a particular kind of community and provide unique pastoral care," Leonard added. "They can turn the weakness of their smallness into a strength. It's natural to want to be part of a group where people know when you're sick and care when you die."

Moreover, small and medium churches may be doing the best job of "conversion growth" -- evangelizing and baptizing people whose entire families are non-Christian, Bullard said. These churches are at the grassroots of their communities and in position to know and reach non-Christians, he explained, stressing the need to invigorate and revitalize those congregations.

And a boomerang effect may signal a positive trend for churches in small communities on the far fringes of urban areas, Leonard said. People fleeing urban and suburban congestion are repopulating many of those smaller communities -- and coming to church.

For example, increasing numbers of people who work in Fort Worth, Texas, are moving northwest to Wise County and providing a boon to the churches, he reported. As this trend develops elsewhere, "many churches are being rejuvenated by the flight from the cities," he said. "So, you never know when things can change on you."

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## **Typical church growing on paper, but actually in decline, study says**

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- The typical Southern Baptist Convention church appears to be growing but in fact is in decline, according to a new comprehensive study by the SBC Home Mission Board.

The study, "A Large Convention of Small Churches," was conducted by HMB researcher Phil Jones, using data from annual statistical reports filed by most of the SBC's 40,000 churches.

The typical SBC church has 233 total members, of which 168 are resident members. It is barely growing in total membership, having increased by one member from 1994 to 1995. It has 70 people in a Sunday morning worship service, reported five baptisms and five other additions during the 1994 -- 95 church year and has an average Sunday school attendance of 55.

The typical church is 67 years old, predominantly white and located in a rural area of the South. It receives slightly more than \$50,000 in undesignated gifts each year, of which it gives 7 percent to the Cooperative Program and 2.4 percent to the local association.

The study profiled the typical SBC church by determining the median number for key statistics. The median is the middle point of all the numbers. For example, of 40,000 Southern Baptist churches, half have 233 or less members, and half have 233 or more.

While giving surface indications of slight growth, the typical SBC church actually is declining in statistical terms, Jones explained. "There have been considerable declines in some of the major programs and emphases of Southern Baptist churches. Even financial data, which are generally increasing, show signs of decrease when controlled for inflation over the past decade."

For example, the median income of a typical SBC church has increased greatly (about 315 percent) since 1972. But most of that increase can be attributed to inflation. "Since 1986, there has been an overall decrease in the adjusted median tithes and offerings," Jones reported. "In purchasing power, the typical church received 5 percent less in tithes and offerings in 1995 as compared with 1986.

At the same time, the typical SBC church has decreased the percentage of gifts it forwards to state and national conventions through the Cooperative Program unified budget. Since 1987, the median percentage given by churches has declined from 7.8 percent to 7 percent. "This helps explain why the median Cooperative Program gifts, adjusted for inflation, has declined more since 1986 than median tithes and offerings or median undesignated receipts," he said.

The overall trend of declining resident membership in SBC churches is not as bad as it appears, however, because it is mainly due to an influx of new, smaller congregations into the convention. "However, the typical older church, those in existence in 1986, has grown only slightly over the past decade," Jones explained. "Given the propensity of Southern Baptist churches not to remove members from their rolls, it is likely that most churches are declining in active membership."

Jones pinpoints 1986 as a pivotal year for SBC churches. "This year began the decline in a number of median statistics, especially financial statistics," he noted. "There is no definitive explanation for this phenomenon. It is not clear whether this trend will eventually be lagged by decline at the convention level or whether growth in a small segment of churches will offset decline for a majority of churches."

Declines noted in the typical church affect Sunday school, discipleship training, baptism rates and Woman's Missionary Union enrollments.

"These declines for the past decade are mostly attributable to the declines in the medians of older, established churches in the convention (those more than 10 years old) as opposed to being caused by the addition of new churches to the convention," Jones explained. "In particular, the baptism rate would have declined even further if not for the starting of new churches."

Among the study's other findings:

-- 85 percent of SBC congregations are made up predominantly of white non-Hispanics; 11 percent are predominantly ethnic and 4 percent are predominantly African-American.

-- Sunday morning remains the primary time Southern Baptists gather for worship.

-- In 1995, the 10 percent of SBC churches that baptized the most people baptized from 23 to 1,313 new Christians each. They totaled 176,559 baptisms, for an average of about 44 baptisms per church. The median size of these congregations was 920 members. Meanwhile, 10 percent of SBC churches did not record any baptisms. The bottom 25 percent baptized no more than one person per church.

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-- Marv Knox contributed to this story.

## **Fourth federal appeals court upholds religious freedom law**

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A fourth federal appeals court has upheld the constitutionality of a law passed in 1993 to expand protection of religious practice.

The 9th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals ruled that a secret recording of a murder suspect's confession to a priest violated both the Religious Freedom Restoration Act and the Fourth Amendment right to privacy.

Writing for a unanimous three-judge panel Jan. 27, Judge John Noonan refused a plea by an Oregon prosecutor to declare the 1993 act unconstitutional.

Catholic priest Timothy Mockaitis and Archbishop Francis E. George of Portland filed suit last summer seeking destruction of a tape and transcripts of a confession involving Mockaitis and murder suspect Conan Wayne Hale. They also sought an order prohibiting publication of the tape's contents and prohibiting law enforcement officials from taping future confessionals at the Lane County Jail.

Prosecutor Doug Harclerod sought to preserve the tape, attacking the constitutionality of the Religious Freedom Restoration Act.

Hale and another suspect in a triple murder also argued against destroying the tape. Hale said destroying the tape, in which he allegedly admitted to burglary but not murder, would impair his defense.

A federal district court earlier dismissed the complaint, noting that federal courts should refrain from accepting cases that would interfere with an ongoing criminal prosecution.

Noonan, however, said the lower court should not have abstained. Congress did not exceed its authority in enacting RFRA, Noonan said, rejecting Harclerod's claim that the law is unconstitutional.

Harclerod also argued that by singling out religious practice for exemption from generally applied laws, RFRA advanced religion in violation of the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion.

Noonan rejected that argument as well, calling it "a challenge deadly in its implications" for religious liberty.

"Of course the statutory protection of the free exercise of religion is good for religion," Noonan wrote. "Neither the benefit nor the means are contrary to the first liberty assured by the First Amendment and made concrete by RFRA."

An Oregon law authorizing officials to monitor inmate conversations does not extend to a religious sacrament expected to be confidential, Noonan said.

"When the prosecutor asserts the right to tape the sacrament he not only intrudes upon the confession taped but threatens the security of any participation in the sacrament by penitents in the jail," Noonan wrote.

Noonan ordered the prosecutor's office to refrain from "assisting, participating in or using any recording of a confidential communications from inmates of the Lane County Jail to any member of the clergy in the member's professional character."

But Noonan refused the plaintiffs' request to immediately destroy the tape, citing Hale's decision to make the contents public.

In October, the Baptist Joint Committee and other religious groups joined the United States Catholic Conference in asking the 9th Circuit to protect the confidentiality of clergy-penitent communications.

The groups argued that confidentiality in clergy-parishioner communications is integral to many religions, not just the Roman Catholic Church.

"This is a double-barreled victory," said Brent Walker, general counsel at the Washington-based BJC. "It says 'no' to overzealous prosecutors who would violate the sanctity of the confessional as a shortcut to proper police investigation. It also supplies yet another federal court decision upholding RFRA."

The 9th Circuit is the fourth federal appeals court to reject challenges to the constitutionality of RFRA.

The U.S. Supreme Court is expected to settle questions about the law's constitutionality later this year. Justices will hear arguments Feb. 19 in a religious-freedom dispute over a refusal by Boerne, Texas, officials to permit St. Peter Catholic Church to expand a sanctuary located in an historic preservation district.

## **4,000 attend broadcasters' meeting, discuss funding, formats, other issues**

By David Finnigan

ANAHEIM, Calif. (ABP) -- Like churches, charities and other organizations that depend on the donor dollar, religious broadcasters are feeling the financial pinch.

When those broadcasters gathered Jan. 25-28 for their annual meeting, no fewer than eight workshops addressed fund-raising, donor relations and revenue issues for this largely non-profit industry.

"It's the silent subject -- a proven, 25-year statistical decline in the percentage in Christian giving," said Brian Kluth, president of the Milwaukee-based Christian Stewardship Association. "There's a lack of understanding in the Christian community of the grace of giving."

"Unless there's a renewal in stewardship, everything we're about now will begin to unravel," Kluth said.

Christian non-profits, he said, must move away from depending just on weekly offerings and learn to tap into donors who receive monthly sales commissions or year-end bonuses or offering donations made through electronic bank transfers.

Paul Nelson, president of the Virginia-based Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability, said that, "even where income is up, I think the rising dollar is coming from fewer people."

He said that Christian charities have "got to focus on major donors." But he added, "the bread and butter still is your 10- and 20-dollar-a-month donor."

Religious broadcasters have suffered from donor distrust since the sex-and-money scandals that scarred several prominent Christian ministries with the image of 1980s excess and greed.

The key figure in those scandals, Jim Bakker, was on hand for the recent NRB convention in Anaheim, Calif. Bakker, the defrocked Assembly of God minister whose Heritage USA/PTL ministry unraveled in scandal 10 years ago, spent five years in prison.

Conventioneers lined up to have the shy, unassuming, 57-year-old Bakker autograph copies of his 616-page tome, "I Was Wrong."

But Bakker doesn't stand to get rich from the book. Before finishing his prison term in 1994, he signed away his book royalty rights to his lawyers and the Internal Revenue Service, to which he still owes more than \$1 million.

Bakker spoke last year at a regional NRB conference, but NRB president Brandt Gustavson said there are "no plans" to invite Bakker to be an official speaker at future NRB conventions.

Nelson of the Evangelical Council for Financial Accountability said Bakker's once-fellow broadcasters have embraced him because "there seems to be a response to his repentant message ... a gut feeling. It's also not unanimous. But again I think those in the evangelical community are very forgiving."

That sentiment was repeated by 16-year-old Nashville singer Jaci Velasquez, a luncheon performer and Myrrh Records artist. "Jim's awesome," she said. "He has a heart for the Lord. Despite everything that's gone on, he's a Christian."

About 4,000 people attended the NRB convention, down from the 5,000 NRB's Gustavson had predicted. The Christian Booksellers Association convention was held the same week in Nashville, Tenn., and appeared to have cut into NRB attendance.

But with about 200 companies exhibiting to some 4,000 people at this 54th annual gathering, Gustavson said, it was still the NRB's largest convention.

Radio stations make up the bulk of NRB membership. Of the nation's 1,648 religious stations, the largest concentrations are in Texas (125), North Carolina (104), Florida (87) and California (78). James Dobson's "Focus on the Family" program is the industry's top syndicated daily radio show, heard on 943 stations.

Luncheon and evening speakers during the convention included Franklin Graham, son of famed evangelist Billy Graham, and "Eight is Enough" TV star Grant Goodeve, plus a closing night performance by the Christian women's quartet Point of Grace.

Other workshop topics covered station management, law, minority hiring, format problems, the Internet, reaching younger "Generation X" Christians and the Hispanic market. Dennis Mansfield, executive director of the Boise-based Idaho Family Forum, said at one workshop that in public-policy debates and media appearances, he tries to be "brutal with my ideas, but gentle with people."

Like other NRB exhibitors, Mike Hetfield of Michigan-based Zondervan Publishing felt the effects of a booksellers' convention in Tennessee the same week as a broadcasters' convention in California. "A lot of my customers opted to go there," said Hetfield.

Adding to this was Super Bowl Sunday, an afternoon in which, Hetfield said, practically the only people in the convention hall were the exhibitors -- with many of them watching the game on portable TVs.

Gathering at the Anaheim Convention Center across the street from Disneyland, NRB veterans said the exhibit floor was a better balance this year between technical vendors and smaller, people-oriented ministry groups.

Past the larger display areas of publishers and equipment makers, the National Right To Life Committee had a steady trickle of interest. In the next booth over was the Toronto Airport Christian Fellowship, where people held hands, deep in a prayer circle. The Israel Ministry of Tourism sponsored a Sunday morning breakfast and a large vendor area. And Tennessee-based mom and broadcaster Sue Detweiler's "Harmony at Home" radio show found interested station owners in three more states past the three she's heard in now.

For some broadcasters, the Christian youth audience remains elusive. Shawn Andrews, 21, a Baptist from Colorado who's now finishing his senior year at Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., said Christians his age may be faithful but also know they live in a culture dominated by MTV-like superficiality.

"Teens still have a desire to be part of what all teens are part of this generation -- similar interests, music and TV," said Andrews, a convention volunteer. "There's the medium, which is nothing but how you reach them, and then there's the message, which is the gospel."

Marvin Sanders, general manager for the Mississippi-based Donald Wildmon's American Family Radio, said, "most stations have a niche that's older and it's very difficult to target young people ... you can't reach young people and middle-age people with the same program."

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-- David Finnigan is a free-lance religion reporter in Los Angeles.

## **Players balance glamour, demands of NFL with Christian commitment**

By Lacy Thompson

NEW ORLEANS (ABP) -- On the eve of the Super Bowl, Washington Redskin defensive back Darrell Green offered a perspective on professional football's biggest event.

"Folks, football is great ... but people need to know about Jesus Christ," Green said as he accepted the ninth annual Bart Starr Award honoring exemplary character and leadership at home, on the field and in the community.

The award, named after the legendary Green Bay Packer quarterback, is presented annually by Athletes in Action, a subsidiary of Campus Crusade for Christ. Recipients of the award are determined by a vote of NFL players at the end of the season.

Green has played for the Redskins for 14 years, has been to five Pro Bowls and holds the team record for interceptions. He also has established a foundation to help develop young people into leaders. He sponsors learning centers for youth and is involved in other activities to assist those in need.

But Green said those accomplishments pale when compared to the most important thing in his life: "It's Jesus Christ and him crucified."

"God has chosen to allow me to play a game called football," Green said in accepting the award during a breakfast in New Orleans on the day before the Super Bowl. "It's a game. ... And to be able to take that little kid's game -- one of the foolish things of this world -- and glorify Jesus Christ, that's what it's all about. That's the bottom line."

Green told how he came to faith in Christ while in college and found people who helped disciple him in the Christian life. He also emphasized that God is looking for people who will go out and work for him and love others and serve.

Following Green's acceptance of the award, Minnesota Viking receiver Cris Carter echoed the need for a life committed to following and obeying God.

Carter noted the common practice among Christian players of kneeling to pray after scoring a touchdown. "It's kind of easy to bow down in the end zone," he said. "But the real test of my character is, can I bow down to God on a Monday when millions of people are not watching and the stands aren't packed and my wife is not necessarily saying I am a superstar and my little boy is late for school? Can I stand for Christ when adversity comes my way? Can I stand for him on that day?"

Carter's confrontation with adversity came when he was cut by the Philadelphia Eagles. As he recounted details of that time, he began to cry.

"You'll have to excuse me, but when God has touched your life like he's touched my life, you can't help but cry," he said. "When God would save your marriage, when God would save your career, when God would continue to bless you even when you're not worthy of being blessed, you have to cry. You have to cry."

Mike Holmgren, head coach of the Super Bowl champion Green Bay Packers, spoke of his commitment to his family and faith. "When you get into professional football and you're a professional athlete or a coach or for that matter a businessman or anyone, you are challenged every day to step forward and make a commitment and let people know where you stand."

Difficult times teach Christians to rely to God, Holmgren said. "It's so important. I know I can rely on him for all my needs. And I know that the Lord has a plan for my life. And when it gets really tough, that's a comforting thought."

"Disappointments happen," echoed Indianapolis Colts quarterback Jim Harbaugh. "... But really I don't get discouraged. As my faith has grown and I've seen what the Lord has done in my life -- he's taken me through so many disappointments and times when I was hurt -- I know with the Lord I can overcome anything."

Harbaugh said he is encouraged by the increasing number of football players expressing their faith. "It shows where the hearts of many men who play in the NFL are. ... It encourages me. ... I hope fans are encouraged."

Harbaugh also noted that his biggest challenge is not football but being a role model for his son. "For him to know his dad played football, stood for something, was a man for honesty and loved his mother, that's the commitment, that the challenge that's in my life right now."

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## **Texas ministry seeks to protect middle-schoolers from gangs**

By Marv Knox

GARLAND, Texas (ABP) -- When it comes to gangs, Chip Idley and Shawn Risinger think an hour of prevention is worth months, maybe years, of cure.

That's why they and a handful of other Baptists sacrifice their time to keep Powerhouse Club open.

Powerhouse Club is a gang-prevention ministry aimed at middle school children in Garland, Texas, on the northeastern edge of Dallas. Observers say it's a life-saving ministry that can -- and should -- be replicated in towns and cities across the land.

Powerhouse Club occupies a cramped storefront in a low-rent shopping center. It's crowded with second-hand pool and ping-pong tables, electronic games, weight equipment, a makeshift kitchen and cafe booths.

Three or four afternoons a week, it's also crammed with youngsters -- kids looking for something fun and safe to do after school. Lately, they've mostly been Hispanic boys. Some African-Americans have shown up, a few Anglos, and some girls.

At first, they come for recreation and snacks. Who can beat free food and games, especially when your pockets are empty and nobody's at home?

But the kids keep coming back because of caring adults like Idley, volunteer director of the ministry, and Risinger, its primary promoter. Who wants to hang out in a cold, windy park when you can shoot pool with a grownup who knows you by name and cares about your life?

The volunteers who unlock Powerhouse Club's doors and turn on its lights believe they're on a sacred mission: They intend to keep Garland's middle schoolers out of gangs, off drugs, out of prison and alive. And they plan on helping the youngsters come to know Jesus Christ.

Unfortunately, it's a big job.

Police estimate Garland -- an outwardly placid suburb -- is home to 76 juvenile gangs, with membership in the thousands, reported Idley, who also works full-time making computer components. Last year, the community experienced 157 gang-related drive-by shootings. Many Garland gangs reflect youthful entrepreneurism run amok: Some specialize in stealing cars, some sell drugs.

While gang money is alluring, gang magnetism pulls deeper than dollars.

"Acceptance" makes gangs so appealing, Idley explained. For example, many Hispanic youngsters are immigrants who can't speak English well and barely read. School failure pummels their sense of worth.

On top of that, many of the boys live with single mothers or mothers and stepfathers, he adds. So, they either grow up with no father-figure in the home, or the only male around competes for their mother's affection.

"These kids have low self-esteem," Idley said. "Gangs offer to replace rejection with complete acceptance as you are."

Gangs become like the families members wish they had -- close, caring and available, noted Risinger, minister of adults at Northlake Baptist Church in Garland. Gangs also fill another void. They provide role models, albeit bad ones, for early teens who don't feel a disciplined presence in their lives, he said.

Gang activity can flourish in outwardly quiet suburbia because of denial, Risinger stressed. "Everybody ignores it," to the point of not recognizing its obvious signs. He told about a shop owner whose business had been "tagged" -- spray painted in graffiti fashion by a gang as a sign of turf -- and didn't even know what the strange markings meant.

People in small towns and suburbs can't comprehend the presence of gangs among them, Idley added. "That's something that happens in Dallas," the nay-sayers think.

Powerhouse Club has taken the presence of gangs seriously since 1993. That's when Brenda Cox, a member of Lake Pointe Baptist Church in nearby Rowlett, began the ministry after her son got involved in a gang.

The ministry struggled for a couple of years, perpetually short-staffed due to the difficulty of one family pulling off such a feat, said Lindsay Cofield, a church-and-community-ministries consultant for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

But when Cox sought help, she quickly got the aid of the BGCT and Dallas Baptist Association. Soon, the association channeled support to Powerhouse Club from four Baptist churches in Garland -- Freeman Heights, Northlake, Orchard Hills and South Garland. That base has provided the club with the foundation to develop a growing ministry.

"This past few months, it has blossomed in impact," Cofield said. "It's the only model where multiple churches went together to do what they couldn't do alone."

Powerhouse Club's formula is simple: The facility operates on a skinny budget, just enough to pay rent and utilities. The supporting churches provide volunteers to keep the club open after school and to intersect with the lives of the youngsters.

Currently, Northlake and South Garland churches provide the bulk of the volunteers, enough to open the club every Tuesday and Friday. Idley and Risinger each take an afternoon every-other week, to keep the facility open a third afternoon per week.

Adult volunteers supply soft drinks and give their time and interest, so the club stays open for two hours. Right now, the kids primarily play games, listen to music and maybe lift weights. Risinger hopes to launch a tutoring program to help the youngsters improve their grades, feel better about themselves and plan on staying in school.

Through the game-playing, teaching and snacking, the volunteers make sure the kids know they're there because of Jesus' love. "In everything we do, the underlying theme is we want the kids to know Christ," Risinger said. And some youngsters have claimed that relationship for their own, accepting Jesus as their savior.

"This is churches doing what churches do best -- provide 'family' nurture," said Jana Young, an associate director of missions for Dallas Association. Powerhouse Club offers youngsters friendship with other youth, as well as strong relationships with role models, people who show them alternatives to lifestyles of drugs and violence, she added.

Ministries like Powerhouse Club can be duplicated in almost any place where gang-prevention and Christian nurture of youth are needed, Cofield and Young insisted.

"The volunteers make it work; their heart for kids and passion make it work," Cofield said. "They don't have to be experts. They just care about kids."

"If you've got four or five churches working together, this is something they can do without a large investment of money and time," Young added.

Volunteers say their time is well-invested, especially when they hear words like those of Joe Soto, who just finished hitting on a punching bag with Idley. "There are nice people here," he said. "I like this place because it's fun."

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-- Photos available by request.

## **Advocates urge lawmakers to give kids a healthy start**

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- More than 1,200 Texans marched from First Baptist Church in Austin to the south steps of their State Capitol, calling on lawmakers to provide a "healthy start for Texas children."

Phil Strickland, president of Texans Care for Children, a statewide multi-issue child advocacy organization, urged the Child Advocacy Day crowd to focus on "health care, child care, reading, stability and security" issues as they lobbied legislators.

"We ask lawmakers to commit to providing a healthy start for Texas children by supporting preventive health care, affordable and positive child care, success in school, stability at home and security at home," said Strickland, director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission.

Keynote speaker David Smith, former state health commissioner, pointed out that 1.3 million Texas children do not have health insurance.

Specifically, the child advocates asked lawmakers to:

--Support creation of the Texas Healthy Kids Corporation, a non-profit organization organized to increase access to health care for uninsured children in the state.

--Allocate the state funds needed to qualify for all available federal dollars to provide quality child care services for working parents.

--Create intensive reading programs in the early grades.

--Support effective investigation of abuse and neglect; secure nurturing homes for unsafe children; and fund prevention programs to keep teenagers safe.

--Protect basic food and shelter needs of children as their parents make the transition back to work.

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-- By Ken Camp

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**END**