

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **Virginia Baptist conference examines arts and the gospel**

By Michael Clingenpeel

ROANOKE, Va. (ABP) -- With their emphasis on doing evangelism and missions, Baptists may be unlikely candidates to become leading patrons of the arts.

If they hope to reach an increasingly secular, postmodern society, however, they may need to stop and smell the roses, said speakers at a recent conference on the arts and evangelism in Roanoke, Va.

"The arts are the way the world hears," said Calvin Miller, a professor of preaching at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, and inspirational author.

Communication today is "relational," Miller said. "Every show is a talk show. We get our news relationally. ... What is the most relational way to reach a relational generation? The arts."

To reach people today, the church "needs to figure ways to artistically tell the story of Jesus Christ," Miller said.

Virginia Baptists departed from the usual revivalist fare at their annual state evangelism conference to focus on a theme of "Good News in the Arts: Becoming a Creative Witness for the 21st Century." Some people who attended the conference complained they liked the traditional emphasis better, acknowledged Dan Agee, who planned the conference for the Virginia Baptist Mission Board, but he didn't apologize.

"We use art every day but don't stretch very far with it," Agee said. "This conference empowers folks, gives permission for folks to try something different."

In an interview prior to his speech at the conference, Miller said Baptists have traditionally not been friendly toward the arts because of the denomination's emphasis on evangelism.

"If people are dying and going to hell, you've got to be out there reaching," he said. "The urgency sort of obliterates the aesthetics."

While he said he agrees that evangelism is vital, Miller said he also tries to develop "a sense of the aesthetics" in ministerial students he teaches. "I'm pretty well convinced that aesthetics are a mark of the Spirit," he said.

Another speaker at the conference, art teacher Barbara Lashley, said art can be useful both for outreach and for private devotion.

"The arts and religion are siblings; we should use them together," Lashley said.

When she was working on a master's degree, Lashley said, she did a painting every day for a year in order to find which medium best suited her talents. One month, she painted depictions of crosses. The same month, she was grieving with a friend whose son was killed in an accident.

"Then I realized I was getting positive feelings because of the cross pictures. I realized my art needed to be more spiritual no matter what medium I would use."

An art teacher, she helped found Heaven and Earth, an alliance of 27 artists who paint spiritual themes. She also led her church to play host to a Lenten season art exhibit that involved people who are unchurched.

Traditional forms of evangelism, such as revival meetings, are losing their effectiveness in many churches, another speaker said.

"Evangelism must take a more creative form," said Bert Rait, an evangelist who has written a musical play based on the book of Revelation.

"If we continue to do revivals in the year 2000 like we are currently doing, we're dead in the water," Rait said. "I'm not saying they aren't important. They are. But continuing in the same format, many churches will not be doing revivals."

Another speaker at the conference, Kirk Lashley, executive director of the Roanoke Valley Baptist Association, said "fragments of truth" in secular films can be powerful tools for evangelism and discipleship.

"All of the comedy, tragedy, passion, feeling of human existence is explored through film," Lashley said. "Our task is to take those themes and enter into dialogue with folks about these issues. The very fact that they are introduced in the secular arena allows us to enter into our mission field."

Lashley acknowledged that some secular films may shock and offend Christian sensibilities and may be "unsuitable in certain settings and with certain people." He challenged church members, however, to overcome their "discomfort in the secular arena" if they hope to reach unchurched people.

Even strong supporters of using arts to convey the gospel message acknowledged risks in the method.

One danger, Miller said, is "the arts can become their own Baal." One example, he said, is a lack of vitality in worship which he blames on entertainment-oriented church services. "I am not sure that American evangelical worship has progressed beyond another genre of entertainment," he said.

John Ed Mathison, pastor of Frazier Memorial Methodist Church in Birmingham, Ala., agreed the emphasis on arts in the worship can be taken too far. "Creation argues for it," he said, "but we don't worship the creation but the one who creates."

"Beauty points to the creator," Mathison said.

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## **Southern Baptists 'miss the point' of Great Commission, prof says**

By Joe Scott

OSAGE BEACH, Mo. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists may "have missed the point" of Jesus' Great Commission, a retired seminary professor suggests.

The Gospel of Matthew closes by quoting Jesus as saying: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you ... ."

While those words fuel much of Baptists' evangelistic and missionary zeal, churches often fail to fulfill the last part of the command, said Lucien Coleman, retired religious education professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"We go, we baptize, but we fall short of making disciples," Coleman told the Missouri Baptist Religious Education Association Jan. 27-29 in Osage Beach, Mo.

"If we were serious about the third part of the Great Commission -- teaching them to observe all things -- as we are about the other two parts, I think we would see a more fruitful harvest of disciples from evangelism," Coleman said.

"Many people in our churches are biblically illiterate," added Martha Bergen, president of the association. "Especially when we consider kids, they're not much different from the kids of the world." said Bergen, a professor at Hannibal-LaGrange College.

Coleman said most members of Baptist churches cannot effectively share their faith because they have not been disciplined.

"The Sunday school is a great outreach tool, but that is not its primary purpose," Coleman said. "Its primary purpose is to teach biblical principles accurately."

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-- Joe Scott is a correspondent for Word & Way, news journal of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

## **Mercer theology school announces lecture series**

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Atlanta pastor Bill Self will deliver the first in a lecture series established in his name March 17-19 at Mercer University's School of Theology, school officials announced Feb. 12.

The William L. Self Preaching Lectures have been established "to enlighten and inspire those whose calling is to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ," said Alan Culpepper, dean of the theology school.

Culpepper said it is "most appropriate" that Self, pastor of Johns Creek Baptist Church in Alpharetta, Ga., and former long-time pastor at Wieuca Road Baptist Church in Atlanta, be the series' inaugural speaker.

The theology school is located on the Georgia Baptist university's satellite campus in Atlanta. Mercer's main campus is in Macon.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Christian broadcasters worry about Hong Kong future**

By David Finnigan

ANAHEIM, Calif. (ABP) -- Religious broadcasting in Hong Kong is in limbo less than six months before a treaty expires returning the British colony to Chinese control, according to several speakers at a recent meeting.

Hong Kong was a workshop topic at the annual convention of the National Religious Broadcasters, which met across the street from Disneyland and attracted about 4,000 Christian radio and TV executives.

Christian broadcasters have been beaming gospel radio shows via short-wave into China since at least 1946 and are part of almost two centuries of missionary work there. In anticipation of the takeover by mainland China, broadcasters in Hong Kong are moving production and satellite facilities to other Asian countries and North America.

Britain's treaty with China for Hong Kong control ends July 1, 1997, when the wealthy financial hub goes back to Chinese control. Despite production and technical pullouts, some broadcasting employees said they will stay and work in the soon-to-be communist-run city.

"We will stay until we're kicked out," said Jim Bowman, president of the U.S.-based Far East Broadcasting Co., a Christian short-wave radio network that receives 24,000 letters a year from mainland Chinese listeners.

Bowman said his company's Hong Kong director and some staff will stay in the colony after the takeover to show they are "not afraid, that they would stay and they would do the work of broadcasting the gospel."

Bowman also said his radio shows are not subject to Chinese jamming since they focus on religion -- with no news broadcasts. "If we put on news, you'll be jammed," he said. "We learned that for the right to preach the gospel, we have to stick to preaching. That's just our decision, it's not the decision for every ministry."

Hong Kong is important to Christian broadcasters because letters mailed on the colony are not subject to Chinese censorship as heavily as letters mailed overseas. Bowman said faxes coming into Hong Kong are expensive, but Chinese Christians pay the extra price because faxes are very hard to censor.

"Hong Kong is vital to mail exchange," Bowman said. Chinese officials made two points to his Hong Kong staff: no political broadcasting and a cutback in mail. "We're okay on point number one, we're not okay on point number two," he said.

On the political side, anti-abortion activists at the convention said Hong Kong is a big question mark in the global abortion issue, with the British colony's abortion laws patterned after United Kingdom rules. Mainland China's strict one-child-per-family population policy has resulted in human rights groups reporting widespread, forced abortions. Chinese leaders have not said they will apply such reported policies to densely populated Hong Kong.

"Hong Kong doesn't really register on our radar," said John Willke, an Ohio physician and president of the International Right To Life Federation. "Across the whole Pacific Rim, abortion is not a big thing. They just do it."

Jonathan Chao, president of the California-based China Ministries International, said religious broadcasters and pastors in Hong Kong will succeed only if they work on the "mutual" principles advocated by communist leaders. Hong Kong and mainland Chinese religious groups must not interfere with each others' work and must not criticize Beijing's Hong Kong policy of "one country/two systems," he explained.

"So if a group is totally, pure religious, they can expect to continue," said Chao, but added that many private, church-run schools and colleges may have problems, especially the colony's Protestant schools that emphasize Bible study. Hong Kong pastors who have not emigrated are, he said, "keeping their mouths shut. So, more and more, there are very few people who dare to speak."

While the Internet has grown tremendously in North America, Bowman said China lacks the computer infrastructure to make Christian Internet missionary work successful. Far East Broadcasting has an Internet site, but there is little interest. "Very few (on-line) browses come from China," he said. "It is negligible right now."

The next couple of years in Hong Kong may not be a problem, broadcasters said, but eventually tough decisions will be made on both sides. "We expect the pressure to build and we expect that there'll be interference in our receiving of mail," Bowman said. "And then we'll have to make a decision at that time."

"Where there is real power," Chao said, "China makes sure she has the final say, and has already begun to say."