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Make friends with a non-Christian, former atheist urges conference

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- If you want to learn what changes your church needs to make to reach non-Christians with the gospel, make friends with a non-Christian.

That's the advice of Lee Strobel, a former atheist who became a Christian through the ministry of Willow Creek Community Church in suburban Chicago, where he now serves as teaching pastor.

Strobel, a former reporter with the Chicago Tribune, told his own story Feb. 24 during the Kentucky Baptist Evangelism Conference in Louisville, Ky.

Strobel said his wife, Leslie, became a Christian first, through the gentle but persistent witness of a friend who lived in the same apartment building. That friend wanted to invite Leslie Strobel to her church, but she knew the church culture would be completely foreign to a non-Christian.

"She intuitively knew she couldn't take Leslie to her church," Strobel explained. "She would have run away," he said, from a "300-year time warp" in music styles and sermons geared toward mature believers.

When the friend heard about Willow Creek Community Church and its weekend services designed especially for "seekers," she felt comfortable asking Leslie Strobel to go there with her. Strobel consented, and after a period of time became a Christian.

Her husband didn't want to have anything to do with her newfound religion. He scoffed at her, telling her she must not ask him to go with her and she must not give the church any money.

Finally, after seeing "subtle ways" in which his wife was changing, Lee Strobel agreed to attend a seeker service at Willow Creek. He approached it, however, with an eye toward doing an investigation. He wanted to find out what was really wrong with Christianity.

At that first Willow Creek service, "the music grabbed me by the heart and wouldn't let go," he said. "The drama presented a real slice of life."

That first exposure to Willow Creek set him on a 21-month investigation of Christianity. Finally, "I realized it would require more faith to maintain my atheism than to trust Christ," he said.

Strobel described himself as a ruthless and self-centered person before giving his life to Christ. He told how he hadn't even flinched when his college girlfriend got pregnant and he sent her for an abortion and how he had callously destroyed the career of an employee standing in the way of his own promotion at the newspaper.

But on the day of his conversion, "God began a process ... and I began to change," he said.

The change was so noticeable that the Strobels' 5-year-old daughter one day announced to Leslie Strobel: "Mommy, I want God to do for me what he's doing for Daddy."

Thus an entire family became followers of Christ because of the witness of one friend who was able to team up with a concerned church.

But the results might not have been the same without the help of a sensitive church like Willow Creek, he suggested.

"Often, the most effective way of reaching the lost is through relationships," Strobel explained. "Eight out of 10 people who are unchurched go to church because a friend asked them."

At the same time, one of the most effective ways for individual Christians to be effective in evangelism is to team up with their churches, he added. But that cannot happen unless the church is willing to make the changes necessary to reach the unchurched, he said.

He quoted former Southern Baptist foreign missionary Winston Crawley to say that any church's decision to stick with tradition is a decision to exclude from their reach part of the population.

"I will not someday stand before Jesus Christ and say, 'I cared more about the traditions of my denomination than I did about lost people,'" Strobel declared.

He gave one primary bit of advice for learning how to make a church more sensitive to reaching non-Christians: "Build one authentic, loving relationship with a headed-for-hell Harry or Mary."

This should not be just a surface relationship but one in which a deep friendship develops and the Christian develops such a love for his friend that he cannot stand the thought of that person being separated from Christ for eternity.

Then the Christian should ask, "What do I need to do on a regular basis to reach my friend Harry?" Strobel said. "When you do that, you'll reach all the other unchurched Harrys and Marys."

Not every church should become like Willow Creek, he said. And not every church may need to begin a seeker service, he added. But every church ought to do something to make itself relevant to unchurched Harrys and Marys, he declared.

Some churches might adopt "seeker-sensitive" worship styles, he said. Others might offer monthly seeker services, while others might develop quarterly events for seekers, Saturday night services or small groups for seekers.

"The question is: What is your church going to do?" Strobel said.

Failure of church opened door to gambling in Mississippi, Jones says

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The failure of Christians to be authentic disciples of Jesus Christ opened the door for Mississippi to become the nation's third-largest gambling state, according to the leader of a Baptist moral-concerns agency there.

That Mississippi now is home to 31 casinos is God's "judgment on the churches," said Paul Jones, executive director of the Mississippi Baptist Convention's Christian Action Commission.

Jones spoke during the 50th anniversary seminar of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission March 4. The seminar was held on the campus of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where the CLC's work was formally organized in 1947.

Jones, who has been active in anti-gambling efforts for many years and is considered one of Southern Baptists' foremost authorities on the subject, told of a 1984 meeting in Jackson, Miss., with an unnamed leader of a major gambling cartel.

At that time, the gambling executive confidently told Jones that Mississippi had been targeted by the gambling industry for three reasons, Jones said:

-- Because Mississippi was the poorest state in the nation, it would be easy to make a case for gambling as an economic stimulant. Jones said the executive told him gambling promoters knew "the Christian church had purposely disassociated itself from the poor and hungry of the state."

-- Because Mississippi was the most racially divided state in the nation. Any attempt by churches to speak out against gambling would be seen as "the haves attempting to keep the have-nots from getting ahead," Jones said.

-- Because "most of the religious community was committed to cultural Christianity, not a vibrant faith," the executive told Jones. "If you espoused the historic Christian faith, we could not defeat you."

Eight years later, the gambling executive's prediction had come true, Jones said. "Gambling arose when the Christian community refused to act as the body of Christ."

Last year, Mississippi's casinos took in \$29.4 billion in revenue, Jones reported. He compared that figure to the holdings of all Mississippi banks combined: \$27.6 billion.

Jones cited several negative impacts of the growth of gambling in Mississippi. He said gambling has:

-- Compromised the state's political structure. Since 10 percent of state revenue now comes from gambling, the state has an interest in protecting gambling enterprises, he said. "No decision is made without asking how it will impact gambling."

-- Destroyed families. He cited tactics of new "family-friendly casinos" that provide care and activities for children that indoctrinate them toward gambling while their parents engage in gambling.

Jones listed a number of ills that have afflicted the families of gamblers, such as stealing, divorce and bankruptcy.

But another surprising result is the number of people who have embezzled money from their churches to pay gambling debts, he said. "Our churches are discovering that some of their best people are getting into leadership positions in order to get access to church funds."

When that happens, the "easiest money to embezzle in the church" is missions gifts, Jones said. "The one piece of money not tracked is money that goes out of the city."

Jones said he knows of 15 Baptist churches in Mississippi that have faced such problems with embezzlement.

-- Destroyed legitimate businesses. Pawn shops have sprung up everywhere casinos have been built, he said, and even the nature of what is considered recreation has changed.

Jones said Mississippians, including Christians, have bought into the gambling industry's promotion of the term "gaming" as a softer word for "gambling."

In conclusion, Jones listed three questions he said all citizens ought to ask before agreeing to let their states legalize gambling:

First, "Is it ever a legitimate function of government to make losers of its citizens?"

Every other function of government is intended to help people, he said, but gambling by definition makes losers out of many in order to make winners of a few.

Second, "Is it ever a legitimate function of government to compete with legitimate businesses?"

In days past, such a notion was known as socialism, Jones said.

Third, "It is ever the legitimate function of government to advocate that which is known to deceive people?"

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McDowell cites shift in youth culture from absolutes to redefined tolerance

By Joyce Sweeney Martin

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Not so long ago, the verse of Scripture most quoted by Christian young people was John 3:16. But today, the verse most quoted is "Judge not that ye be not judged," according to Christian apologist Josh McDowell.

A "truth shift" has occurred, McDowell told participants in the 50th anniversary seminar of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission March 3. The seminar was held at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

The concept of objective truth has been replaced by the belief that "all truth is relative," McDowell said. For example, to say that Jesus is the only way to God is now considered a value judgment, not a statement of fact, he said.

As a traveling representative for Campus Crusade for Christ for 33 years, McDowell has spoken to more than 7 million young people on 700 college and university campuses in 84 countries.

Citing that experience, he said he has seen a dramatic change over the last four to seven years.

In a word, tolerance has replaced truth as the "No. 1 virtue in America," McDowell said.

Further, tolerance has been redefined, he said.

No longer is tolerance defined as "to recognize and respect others' beliefs and practices without sharing them," he said. And no longer does tolerance mean a person listens and learns from all people without having to agree with them, he added.

Now, tolerance means that "every single individual's values, beliefs, lifestyles and claims to truth are equal," he said.

For example, a Christian may say he or she believes Jesus Christ is the Son of God, while someone else may say Ronald McDonald is the son of God, McDowell said.

"Under the Constitution, we have equal rights to hold those beliefs," he explained. "Under toleration, those beliefs are equal."

The new definition of tolerance demands that "we praise others' ideas as if they were our own," McDowell said. "All opinions are equal. There is no intellectual way to discern between them."

But, McDowell said, "Christian love and tolerance cannot co-exist." Referring to Jesus' encounter with the woman at the well recorded in John 4, McDowell said Jesus exposed her lifestyle as "sinful," not "alternative."

"Tolerance says, 'I must be indifferent; tolerance says, 'confronting behavior is bigotry'; Christian love says, 'I must speak and act the truth in love,'" McDowell said.

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Revised budget, Williams statement approved by BJC executive panel

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Responding to a mid-year budget cut by its largest contributor, the Baptist Joint Committee's executive committee revised the agency's 1997 budget downward 4 percent at a meeting March 3.

The new budget projects 1997 income at \$835,000, down from the \$870,000 budget approved by the BJC board last fall. The most significant change in the revised budget is a \$48,000 drop in income anticipated from the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The Fellowship cut its budget in January because income lagged behind projected levels of growth. The revision cut funding for the Baptist Joint Committee to \$240,000. Even with the cut, the Fellowship is still the largest contributor of the 10 national bodies that support the 60-year-old religious-liberty agency.

The revised Baptist Joint Committee budget reduces spending for travel, printing and postage.

An independent auditor's report showed the agency's net assets increased by \$102,336 last year. Most of the increase is due to a \$600,000 endowment drive launched by the agency in conjunction with last year's 60th anniversary celebration. To date, gifts and pledges to the BJC endowment total \$306,000.

The Joint Committee panel also adopted a statement opposing the decision by the Joint Committee of the Library of Congress to remove a statue of Roger Williams from the rotunda of the U.S. Capitol.

The statement describes Williams as "the primary architect of the lively experiment of church-state separation as the necessary corollary of religious liberty" and the founder of the first Baptist church in America and the first Baptist denomination in the hemisphere.

The statement commends Sen. John Chafee, R-R.I., for "his efforts to prevent the statue's removal and calls upon all Baptists, especially those in Congress, to vigorously oppose this 'second banishment' of Roger Williams."

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Clinton bars federal funding for cloning of human beings

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Declaring that "human creation is not simply a matter of scientific inquiry," President Clinton issued a directive March 4 barring the use of federal funds for human cloning.

Clinton's announcement came on the heels of recent advances in cloning technology, including the successful cloning of an adult sheep by Scottish scientists.

That breakthrough, Clinton said, "could yield enormous benefits" in agricultural and medical advancements. "But like the splitting of the atom, this is a discovery that carries burdens as well as benefits," he warned.

The advancement in animal cloning "raises the troubling prospect that it might someday be possible to clone human beings," Clinton said.

"There is much about cloning that we still do not know," he said. "But this much we do know: any discovery that touches upon human creation is not simply a matter of scientific inquiry, it is a matter of morality and spirituality as well."

Clinton said each human life is unique and "born of a miracle" that reaches beyond laboratory science. "I believe we must respect this profound gift and resist the temptation to replicate ourselves," he said.

The president also said he had asked the National Bioethics Advisory Commission headed by Harold Shapiro of Princeton University to review the legal and ethical issues raised by cloning and issue a report by the end of May.

Clinton's directive does not restrict privately funded research, but he asked the scientific and medical community to impose a voluntary moratorium on human cloning until the bioethics panel reports its findings and the public has "had a real chance to understand and debate the profound implications of the latest advances."

Based on feedback received by the White House, Clinton said the biotech industry appears "anxious to participate in the moratorium."

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Professor urges 'cautious engagement' by churches in bioethical decisions

By Ken Camp

AUSTIN, Texas (ABP) -- Churches should exercise "cautious engagement" in decisions involving scientific advances that allow doctors to "play God" with human life, a Baptist ethicist said at a recent conference.

Dan McGee, an ethics professor at Baylor University, contrasted both the "humble stance" which says life-and-death matters should always be left to God and the "heroic stance" that calls for human activism with a "biblical" view that challenges Christians to exercise human talents while acknowledging that God retains ultimate control.

"Go for it, but with caution," McGee advised.

Rather than leaving life-and-death decisions up to doctors, churches should provide "communities of decision-making" guided by compassion and justice, McGee said. "We must never allow the medical community to become medical popes."

McGee also warned against the "Lone-Ranger tradition" of emphasizing rugged individualism and personal autonomy in making such decisions. "My life doesn't belong just to me," he said. "The reality is that to be human is to be communal. We never really exist in isolation."

Another speaker at the same meeting said churches have a duty to become "communities of moral discourse" on the subject of elective death.

"We have more to say on the heaven and hell we have never seen than the death and dying that daily surround us," said Tim Madison, director of pastoral services at Valley Baptist Medical Center in Harlingen, Texas.

Churches should avoid both extremes of worshipping at the altar of self-determination or viewing the prolonging of life as the ultimate good, he said.

"Human life is not the highest good," Madison said. "God is the highest good."

McGee and Madison were among speakers at an annual conference of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission. The theme of this year's meeting, held in Austin, was "Getting Well: Christian Perspectives on Health, Sickness and Ministry."

Other speakers discussed suffering, death and ministry to those who are sick and dying.

Waco pastor Ken Massey said suffering that precedes healing and wholeness can open Christians to the possibility of grace and make them more prone to pray.

"Suffering is a powerful reminder that everything is not in order," said Massey, pastor of Calvary Baptist Church in Waco. "Not all suffering is redemptive. But there is no redemption apart from suffering."

Hospice chaplain and pastor John Anderson said churches should teach Christians to serve God while approaching death.

"We have a lot of books about how to minister to the dying. We have a lot of books on how to care for the grieving," said Anderson, pastor of Blue Ridge Baptist Church in Marlin, Texas. "We have a lot of books on the dying process. But we talk very seldom about whether the dying person has any responsibility," he said.

Dying Christians teach others how to "die well" by accepting their mortality, bringing congregations together and witnessing to hope of eternal life, Anderson said.

Ministry to the sick and dying is a "foot-washing" job for which control freaks need not apply, said Beaumont chaplain David Cross.

"As we minister to the sick, we must come to the foot washing with warm, comforting water -- neither ice-cold water that will set their teeth on edge nor boiling water that will cause them to shrink back from us," said Cross, director of pastoral ministries for the Baptist Healthcare System of Southeast Texas.

"If you have to run things, you won't be a good pastoral-care giver," Cross said.

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Ministers' wives haunted by high expectations

By Ken Camp

CEDAR HILL, Texas (ABP) -- A "phantom of the perfect minister's wife" haunts women who are married to pastors and other ministers, said Nancy Ford, new president of the Texas Baptist Ministers' Wives Fellowship.

"She has unlimited time and energy. She can do everything for her family and her church. She can cook all the meals for the sick. She can see every need and meet every need," said Ford, whose husband is minister of education at First Baptist Church in Corsicana, Texas.

The group's secretary, Lila Guerra, described expectations of a minister's wife: "Be holy. Be proper. Be perfect. Be able to do everything. And don't talk too much."

The minister's wife must be friendly to everyone, "and make sure she smiles at everyone on Sunday morning," added Julia Brock, second vice president for the fellowship. But she dare not be so close to anyone within the congregation that she seems to be excluding others.

About 300 women attended an annual retreat for ministers' wives Feb. 28-March 1, sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Woman's Missionary Union of Texas.

One panel described the challenge faced by a minister's wife of "plugging in" to church life without "burning out."

One conference participant described her role as "unpaid associate pastor." Another said that she went from a church where she was "expected to do everything," including acting as wedding director for every marriage ceremony at the church, to another congregation that was so protective of her family time that she felt unable to use her spiritual gifts.

Churches can help ministers strengthen their families, said Dick Maples, coordinator of minister and church relations for the state convention. He offered several suggestions:

- Honor the minister's day off. When the minister has a day off scheduled, limit phone calls to emergencies.
- Give the minister a weekend off every quarter. Once every three months, give the minister a Thursday through Saturday respite in recognition of the many Saturdays that he conducts weddings and funerals and handles emergencies.

"This shouldn't be counted as vacation. It's just rest and family time," Maples said. "The minister and his children give up so much of their family time in order to minister to the congregation. The church can give back some of that time."

• -- Let the minister's children be children. "Don't expect the minister's children to be paragons of virtue," Maples said. "Children are children. The minister's children are no different from the rest of the children in the congregation."

-- Affirm the minister's children. "The children will get enough flack at school over being the preacher's kids. The church should be different. They don't need to encounter that kind of critical, negative attitude there," Maples said.

-- Be sure the minister's salary is adequate. "Be realistic about what is really salary and what are legitimate business expenses," Maples said. Auto and book allowances should be considered separately from salary, he said. "Some churches are very unrealistic about what they count as part of the minister's salary. It is unethical and unfair for churches to do that."

-- Meet housing needs. If the church provides a housing allowance, make sure it is adequate for the area. If the church provides a parsonage, make sure it is redecorated on a regular basis -- not just when a new minister arrives.

"And treat the parsonage as the minister's home, not the church's home," Maples said. "The minister and his family should be afforded the same privacy that members of the congregation demand for themselves."

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Mother Teresa, President Clinton top Gallup's most-admired list

By Marv Knox

PRINCETON, N.J. (ABP) -- Mother Teresa and Bill Clinton are the people Americans admire most, according to the Gallup Poll. And evangelist Billy Graham continues to shine in Americans' eyes, making his 39th appearance on the most-admired survey.

The poll was conducted in late 1996. Results were reported in the latest issue of Emerging Trends, a newsletter published by the Gallup organization's Princeton Religion Research Center.

Gallup pollsters surveyed U.S. adults nationwide, asking them: "What man and woman that you have heard or read about, living today in any part of the world, do you admire most?" The researchers prepared a Top 10 list for both women and men, based on respondents' first two choices in each category.

Mother Teresa, a Roman Catholic nun who has committed her life to serving the poorest outcasts in Indian society, is the woman admired most by 40 percent of Americans. Clinton, whose popularity was buoyed by his recent presidential election victory, topped the list of men.

But the perennial winner was Graham, who first made the list in 1955. He has been on the Top 10 list every year the poll has been conducted except 1962, Gallup researchers reported.

The 1996 winners are:

-- Most admired women

1. Mother Teresa

2. First Lady Hillary Clinton

3. Former First Lady Barbara Bush

4. Television personality Oprah Winfrey and Elizabeth Dole, president of the American Red Cross (tie)

6. Margaret Thatcher, former prime minister of Great Britain

7. Princess Diana

8. Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and former First Lady Nancy Reagan (tie)

10. Singer Barbra Streisand, Queen Elizabeth, former First Lady Rosalyn Carter and U.S. Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor (tie)

-- Most admired men

1. Bill Clinton
2. Pope John Paul II
3. Retired U.S. Army Gen. Colin Powell and Billy Graham (tie)
5. Former President Jimmy Carter; Sen. Bob Dole, former candidate for U.S. president; former President Ronald Reagan (tie)
8. South African President Nelson Mandela, former President George Bush, basketball star Michael Jordan and retired U.S. Army General Norman Schwarzkopf (tie)

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