

March 18, 1997

(97-24)

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Wounded missionary helped by Albanian 'angel' of mercy

By Robert O'Brien

DURRES, Albania (ABP) -- Debbie Ayers had her Bible in her hand when a blow like an "iron skillet hitting a dinner bell" knocked her to the ground.

"I may have momentarily lost consciousness," the 45-year-old Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary recalled later. "I didn't know if I'd been mugged or what, but I knew my name, and I knew I was down and needed help."

Twenty yards away, missionary Bert Ayers saw his wife fall and ran to her amid chaos and gunfire in the Albanian port city of Durres on March 13.

Nine CBF mission personnel and seven children had made perilous trips to Durres to seek evacuation.

Ayers cradled his wife and tried in vain to stop the blood gushing from the back of her head. Then, with the help of a Mennonite missionary, he loaded her into a car to drive to a hospital.

Suddenly, an Albanian man stepped calmly out of the every-man-for-himself melee surrounding them and offered to show them the way.

The Mennonite missionary drove. Ayers held his wife and tried to suppress the blood flow. The Albanian stranger, who remains a mystery to the missionaries, navigated what they recall as "a very strange path." He guided them quickly and daringly through a series of turns and shortcuts that they say "didn't look like places we could go." But they made it each time, trimming many minutes and a lot of bumpy road off the high-speed dash to a hospital. Medical personnel stopped the bleeding before too much blood was lost.

An Albanian doctor said a bullet entered the back of Debbie Ayers' head, burrowed under her scalp for about an inch, and then exited with only a glancing blow to the skull.

"You're hard-headed," he commented. "Yes," she replied with a grin. "Just like Albanians. I guess that makes me a sister." The doctor laughed, maybe for the first time that day as he fought desperate conditions at a besieged hospital with no electricity.

Debbie Ayers' sense of humor has remained intact, although she, her husband and three children still recoil at the thought of the horror leading up to their eventual evacuation to Italy.

And she does not laugh at mention of the stranger -- who has not been seen since. As suddenly as he had appeared, he disappeared after accompanying the Mennonite missionary back to the port to retrieve the Ayers' passports.

The Mennonite man turned to thank the stranger for his kindness -- but he was gone. "They were standing together in an open area," Bert Ayers said. "There was no where he could have gone; nothing he could have ducked behind.

"We're all convinced he was an angel."

Angel or not, "he came just in time and knew just where to go and what to do and then left," marveled Debbie Ayers.

"God was with us the whole way. I've always known that danger goes with the job of being a missionary and that we have to place our trust in God," she said. "This shows how big he is."

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Baptists evacuate missionaries from anarchic Albania

DURRES, Albania (ABP) -- As Albania descended into anarchy, Baptists began evacuating their missionaries from the Balkan nation, and one was wounded in the attempt.

A revolt stemming from public rage over failed investment schemes that caused thousands of Albanians to lose their savings has grown into anti-government protests and plunged the country into chaos. The unrest, which began in southern Albania, has reached the streets of Tirana, the capital.

The Associated Press reported that gangs are ransacking armories and citizens are increasingly taking up arms to protect themselves. Some cities are without electricity and law and order has broken down completely. At least 12 people were reported killed throughout the country, many of them by random gunfire.

It was random gunfire that wounded Deborah Ayers, a Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionary March 13.

Ayers was struck a glancing blow in the back of her head when gunfire erupted while she and other missionaries attempted to leave Albania from the port city of Durres on the Adriatic Sea.

Nine CBF missionaries and seven children left Albania March 13.

All Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board workers remaining in Albania left the country March 12.

Ayers, 45, has worked as a Fellowship missionary to Albanian peoples with her husband, Bert, since 1993. She is a native of Lakeland, Fla.

Four U.S. military helicopters based on warships in the Ionian Sea began evacuating Americans last week. Up to 2,000 U.S. citizens were in the country and State Department spokesman Nicholas Burns said the flights could continue for days.

Italian helicopters also airlifted 400 people from Tirana, and embassies of Britain and other countries hurried with plans to get their nationals out.

Nine Foreign Mission Board workers evacuated to Greece and Bosnia earlier in March, but the continued violence prompted mission administrators to pull the remaining nine workers from the country as well.

Among them, Bill and Debbie McIntyre of Washington state and Oklahoma, Mark Hinton of Alabama and Suzanne Lacy of Kentucky relocated to Thessaloniki, Greece, while James Bradley of Alabama moved to Skopje, Macedonia. They all will continue their study of the Albanian language and work with the large groups of ethnic Albanians in those countries.

Kevin Walker of Mississippi, Gale and Leslie Hartley of Tennessee; and Lawrence Duhon of Texas relocated to Sarajevo, Bosnia, where they will help with church-planting efforts. Eight of the nine workers who evacuated earlier also relocated to Bosnia.

Also evacuated was Lawrence Duhon of Texas.

Nine CBF missionaries were in Mottola, Italy, beginning March 16. CBF missionaries Don and Helen McNeely, based in Berlin, joined them there to help them sort through needs and priorities. They plan to relocate to Prague, the Czech Republic, from which they will make plans for the future.

A psychologist and former missionary, Milton Womack of Houston, will meet the group in Prague to help the missionaries and their children deal with post-traumatic shock. He will be joined by Keith Parks, CBF global missions coordinator.

Besides Bert and Debbie Ayers, other CBF missionaries in Motolla include Rick and Martha Shaw of New Mexico and Virginia; Tony and Ricki Buesing of Texas and Ohio; Robert and Kathy Smith of Louisiana and North Carolina; and Katie Dobbs of Texas. Mary Ida Buzhardt of South Carolina evacuated earlier to London, and Arville and Shelia Earl of Texas arrived earlier in the States due to a death in the family.

The Baptist Missionary Society of Great Britain still had six missionary couples in the country through Thursday, March 13. They were called to the British Embassy in Tirana Thursday afternoon and told they would be evacuated by Royal Air Force planes.

However, the road to the airport was closed Thursday afternoon and rebels overran the airport, so the RAF planes did not land. Instead, the BMS missionaries and others were ferried across the Adriatic Sea on Friday by an Italian Navy ship. They expect to fly back to Great Britain as soon as passage can be arranged, according to a BMS spokesman.

BMS representative David McFarland, stationed in Bari, spent Friday afternoon, March 14, at the port to see if he could get any word from incoming Baptist missionaries arriving from Albania. As of late Friday afternoon, he could only confirm that authorities told him some British and/or Americans had arrived and were being airlifted directly from the port to an airport.

Some of the relocations will help evangelize other parts of the Balkans. In September and November 1996, six FMB missionary couples entered Bosnia for temporary six-month assignments to respond to an openness to the gospel after four years of civil war. During the war, the Foreign Mission Board sent more than \$1.5 million in humanitarian aid through several Baptist-related relief agencies based in Croatia and Serbia.

Mission leaders hoped other workers would come forward for long-term assignments before the six-month commitments were completed.

"We have been praying for extra workers to go into Bosnia for more than a year," said Larry Cox, who directs Foreign Mission Board efforts in the area. "I believe God has answered that prayer by using an unfortunate situation in Albania to send workers into Bosnia."

Political developments in Albania may eventually quell the unrest. President Sali Berisha agreed to June elections and a coalition government in an attempt to quell the insurrection.

Rebels, however, have insisted on Berisha's resignation. The president's son and daughter and five other family members have fled to Italy, according to the Associated Press.

The violence threatens growth on one of the most responsive mission fields in Eastern Europe. Dozens of evangelical churches have sprouted across Albania in recent years as people have responded rapidly to the gospel.

The Ayerses opened CBF work in Albania with an agricultural ministry. Since then, four more families and two single persons have joined them, expanding the emphasis to include church planting through English teaching

and other ministries. A number of short-term personnel have served in support roles, and CBF in South Carolina has developed a partnership with the CBF Albanian team.

More than 830 villages in Albania's rugged countryside have been the focus of a program called Albania Evangelical Rural Outreach (AERO), carried out by Foreign Mission Board missionaries in cooperation with Campus Crusade for Christ, Helimission and Albanian believers.

Since 1994, hundreds of missionary workers have shown Campus Crusade's "Jesus" film to more than 67,000 Albanians. That witnessing effort has resulted in hundreds of Albanians committing their lives to Christ. Churches have been organizing rapidly, workers say.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The preceding story, compiled from various sources, updates and replaces an earlier ABP story dated March 14 and another sent to Baptist state papers March 13. It corrects the spelling of Debbie Ayers' name and corrects earlier sketchy information that misreported the nature of her wound.

Alliance of Baptists revisits its founding 'covenant'

By Bob Allen

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- In 1987, the moderate/progressive Southern Baptist Alliance formed around a seven-point "covenant" affirming traditions they viewed as under attack by conservatives then gaining control of the Southern Baptist Convention.

With the SBC strife which birthed them now a fading memory, members of the group -- now called the Alliance of Baptists -- recently discussed updating their founding document to reflect more current concerns.

"We must keep fussing with the Alliance covenant," Mahan Siler, the covenant's principle author, said in the annual Alliance covenant address. "This is a time to revisit the covenant and our mission and reason for being."

The Alliance celebrated its 10th anniversary during its annual convocation March 14-16 in Raleigh, N.C.

"Our 10-year mark is certainly a good point on our journey to ask 'Who are we?'" said Alliance president Nancy Hastings Sehested, pastor of Sweet Fellowship Baptist Church in Clyde, N.C.

A "visioning" committee appointed last year is reviewing the Alliance's covenant and mission statement, she said, predicting a recommendation will be ready by next year.

Ten years ago, Siler said, the group drafting the statement began with a list of developments in Southern Baptist life they opposed and then restated them in positive terms to affirm principles including freedom of the individual and church, open academic inquiry and the ordination of women.

"The Alliance covenant was primarily a reactive document," said Siler, pastor of Pullen Memorial Baptist Church in Raleigh. "It was responding to a particular moment in Southern Baptist history."

In the last decade, however, conservatives solidified control of the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention. A second moderate faction formed, the larger and more centrist Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, and the Alliance changed its name from "Southern Baptist Alliance" to "Alliance of Baptists" to reflect a broader membership and waning SBC loyalty.

The Alliance is no longer driven by "the political ethos" of the Southern Baptist Convention, Siler said. "We are in a different time now," he said, asking, "Does the covenant express who we are now?"

In recent years, the Alliance has branched out into ecumenical partnerships and speaking out on sometimes controversial issues such as Jewish-Christian relations, racism, the 30-year-old trade embargo against Cuba and human sexuality.

"In contrast to a decade ago, we are less into reacting and more into proacting," Siler observed, "less into surviving and more into venturing, less into finding a family and more into being a family of God, less into institutional goals and more into being a movement of God and for God in our time, less into preserving Southern Baptist traditions and more into living out the wisdom of our Baptist heritage."

Siler suggested the Alliance covenant might be expanded to be more inclusive of gays and lesbians, to extend ecumenical concerns to non-Christian world religions, to soften its emphasis on "servant" pastoral leadership to empower ministers -- particularly women -- who struggle with issues of legitimate authority and to embrace an "earth-centered spirituality."

At a workshop, an Alliance task force sought input for a study of spiritual, theological and church-related environmental concerns. The study, authorized by Alliance directors, will propose a "paradigm shift in the way we view our environment," said Herman Greene, a North Carolina lawyer who chairs the task force.

Ted Purcell, a task-force member, predicted the study will raise the basic question of "does nature reveal or conceal God."

"What if we began to think about nature as the other sacred book and we say we have to study the Bible?" Purcell asked.

"If we really get serious about this," Purcell said, "I predict it will be as controversial as the sexuality task group," which declined to condemn homosexuality, leaving it a matter of conscience for individual Alliance congregations.

In his annual state-of-the-Alliance report, Executive Director Stan Hastey suggested the group give "greater prominence" to the covenant's sixth commitment of proclaiming a gospel message of repentance, reconciliation and social and economic justice.

The "domestic and international dimensions" of proclaiming the gospel to the poor "will place us at the center of what God is about in the world," Hastey said.

"I have to tell you, in absolute candor, I find these ideas scary," Hastey added. "If accepted and implemented they will cost me. I think we mustn't kid ourselves about what is being suggested. This is gospel stuff."

Hastey quoted Census Bureau statistics saying the wealthiest 1 percent of the United States population owns 40 percent of the country's net worth, more than is owned by the bottom 90 percent of the population.

More than half of inner-city adults are unemployed, he added. Worldwide, 1.2 billion people live in poverty and 800 million people -- a quarter of them children -- are chronically hungry, malnourished or starving.

In the 1990s, 1.5 billion people have incomes lower than in previous decades, he said, while 358 billionaires in the world hold greater wealth than the combined annual income of half the world's population.

Hastey said his "growing conviction" is that Alliance members should "give ourselves" to such concerns and "the new work it will demand."

During a business session, Hastey announced new conversations with leaders of the United Church of Christ, generally regarded as among the most liberal Protestant denominations in the United States. The 1,500-member UCC, based in Cleveland, Ohio, joins the predominantly black Progressive National Baptist Convention, the Canadian Atlantic Baptist Fellowship, the Roger Williams Fellowship of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. and the Fraternity of Cuban Baptist Churches in ongoing dialogue with the Washington-based Alliance.

"We believe these conversations are of God and we have a future together," said Rollin Russell, UCC southern conference minister.

Areas of discussion will include "privilege of call," which enables pastors of other denominations to serve in the UCC, Russell said. The denomination, he said, is "receiving many of your colleagues and [has] been doing so for the past 20 years."

Other discussions involve guidelines for Alliance churches wishing to affiliate with the UCC and using UCC recognition to endorse industrial and military chaplains for the Alliance of Baptists, he said.

Next year's Alliance convocation will be March 12-14 at Calvary Baptist Church in Washington.

ABC seminary president Manfred Brauch resigns

WYNNEWOOD, Pa. (ABP) -- Manfred Brauch has resigned as president of Eastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wynnewood, Pa., a post he has held eight years.

Brauch, a New Testament scholar, is leaving the post June 30, he said, to return to teaching and research. The seminary is one of nine schools related to the 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

Scott Rodin, vice president for advancement, becomes acting president July 1 as a search committee looks for a new president, according to American Baptist News Service.

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-- By ABP staff

Speakers call on churches to help rebuild 'social capital'

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- American families are living on borrowed "social capital" which threatens to bankrupt society, speakers said during a "Family Summit" March 17-18.

The faith community will be called upon more than any other group to help America rebuild its social foundation, said Don Eberly, director of the Civil Society Project and author of the book "Restoring the Good Society."

Eberly was one of three keynote speakers addressing the Family Summit, sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics. The conference was held at Immanuel Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.

Speakers called on the Christian community to help end America's "divorce culture," help fathers reconnect with their families, help families redefine the relationship between work and family time and teach families a biblical understanding of money.

The social capital of American society is more important than traditional economic forms of capital, such as money and machinery, Eberly said. "Public well-being flows from the well of private virtue."

America's democratic form of government "is not just about politics and parties," Eberly said. "It's about the forms into which we pour our character and virtues."

An "unbreakable link" exists between the functioning of the family unit and the functioning of democratic government, said Eberly, whose writings have been cited by politicians as diverse as President Bill Clinton and Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

While much evidence may be cited to indicate the future of the American family is bleak, Eberly said he is encouraged because more influential people are realizing something must be changed.

The challenge is that "people now have a far clearer idea of what they want in America than how to get there," he said.

One key starting point in creating change is to address America's "divorce culture," said Barbara Dafoe Whitehead, a social scientist who has written a new book on the impact of divorce in America.

The problem is not just that so many marriages now end in divorce but that divorce has become "a normal and accepted event of family life," she said.

This "culture of divorce" causes Americans to burn much of their social capital on the fallout of divorce -- social capital that otherwise could be spent on helping the elderly and the young, she said.

Whitehead, who has been married 30 years herself but has experienced the divorces of four siblings and one child, said she does not want to outlaw divorce. But she does want to make divorce an option of last resort, she said.

Despite the portrayal in popular culture of divorce as a positive and liberating experience, few people who actually get a divorce describe it that way, she noted. "Many say it is the most devastating experience of their lives."

Whitehead cited a number of negative effects on society brought about by a culture of divorce, including the impact on children. The divorce culture, she said, is like the welfare culture America has developed in which patterns of behavior are passed on from one generation to the next.

She cited the experience of one adult child of divorced parents who recently wrote to her: "The ghosts of divorce never die. It is a stone thrown into the water of a child's life that creates ripples for years."

Working for "better" divorce is not the answer to America's problem, Whitehead said. Rather, the answer is to help create more healthy marriages.

In the church, this might include placing a greater emphasis on traditional wedding vows, she suggested. Wedding vows are important because they signify the contract being made, she said.

Whitehead said she is troubled by the trend in recent decades of couples writing their own marriage vows that may not always lay a good foundation for a healthy marriage. For example, she said, some couples have exchanged the traditional line "as long as we both shall live" for "as long as we both shall love."

Eberly followed Whitehead's presentation on divorce with an appeal for restoring value to the role of fatherhood. "Fatherhood has to be reinforced as a cultural value," he said.

"Not only are fathers important to children; children are important to fathers," he said, citing research that shows men who are involved fathers behave better and become better citizens.

Although the role of fathers has been "devalued" in American society, the presence of a father in the home carries enormous impact on a child, Eberly said. "The chief predictor of crime in a community is not income or class ... but the presence or absence of a father in the homes in that community."

Thus, "fatherhood is a large part of the answer to cultural renewal," he said.

Eberly called on churches to create rituals by which boys are taught how to become men, good husbands and fathers.

An increasing number of American companies are discovering that investing in the social capital of families pays off in business capital, said Marguerite Sallee, president of Corporate Family Solutions, a company that helps businesses create family friendly environments.

"The workplace in many ways is becoming the new American neighborhood," she said.

While the American family has undergone radical change in recent years, so has the American workplace, Sallee explained. Demands are placed on workers to do more with less, and advances in technology make it increasingly harder to get away from one's job, she added.

"There is no such thing as going home from work anymore," Sallee said, explaining that many working mothers and fathers go home from work to do more work via electronic connections or laptop computers.

Family friendly businesses are discovering new ways to help families stay together, Sallee said. This, in turn, creates happier and more productive workers, she said. "Employers are discovering that investing in families in the workplace is good business."

She cited one client that now offers back-up childcare on days when schools are closed. Another company offers a summer camp for children of employees, including lunchtime picnics for parents and children. Another company provides six weeks of on-site infant care for newborns.

"It would be wonderful if we could return to the image of the traditional family, but that is not realistic economically," Sallee said. The next-best alternative, she suggested, is to create better work environments in which families are able to spend more time together.

The economics of family life create yet another strain on the social capital of America, said David Crocker, pastor of Snyder Memorial Baptist Church in Fayetteville, N.C. Crocker delivered the opening theme interpretation for the conference.

"Show me the money," a line made famous by the current movie "Jerry Maguire," has become the symbolic watchword for many Americans' perspective on life, Crocker said.

In a culture dominated by materialism, families struggle with knowing where to draw the line on acquiring things, he said. And few people connect their spending habits with their faith, he added.

Crocker cited the research of Robert Wuthnow, who found that "people of faith often do not make any connection between faith and money."

In fact, Crocker said, many people of faith refuse even to discuss money. They are more likely to talk about their sex lives than to feel freedom to talk about their finances, he said.

"Breaking through the barrier against talking about money must be the first step," he said.

A second step would be to understand what greed is, he added. "Almost everyone agrees greed is a bad thing, but few can agree on what it is."

Drawing on Crocker's statements, Eberly noted the irony that the American economy is growing more strong and robust while social indicators continue to decline. These two aspects of life have become like unhooked freight trains speeding in opposite directions, he said.

Yet, ultimately the lack of investment in social capital will derail the growth in economic capital, Eberly predicted. "We are living on borrowed capital."

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America's 'divorce culture' a threat, sociologist says

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- America has created a "culture of divorce" that is eating away at the nation's social capital, social researcher Barbara Dafoe Whitehead said during the March 17-18 Family Summit in Nashville, Tenn.

She offered 10 distinctions of the divorce culture:

-- Divorce has become a normal and accepted event in family life.

-- Divorce is associated with much more positive ideas than in the past; it is portrayed as a liberating experience.

-- Divorce actually is defended by some groups as an individual right that should be void of social, legal or religious sanctions.

-- Divorce has become good for business.

-- Divorce has become a pervasive and popular theme in entertainment.

-- Divorce has become the most common loss and bereavement experience for children.

-- The idea that divorce should be avoided because it is harmful to children has been repealed.

-- Commitments have become weaker, more contingent, more fragile.

-- Divorce is passed on to the next generation, with the children of divorce being more likely to experience divorce themselves.

-- Marriage is devalued.

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Parents should teach children to pray, author says at meeting

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- It's never too early to start teaching your children to pray, according to the author of a new book on the subject.

Betty Cloyd, a lay minister in the United Methodist church and wife of a retired Methodist minister, is author of "Children and Prayer: A Shared Pilgrimage." She talked about the book during the Baptist Center for Ethics "Family Summit" March 17.

"What age should you begin teaching children to pray? Before the child is born," she said. "You should begin praying out loud for the child in the womb."

Even after birth, parents should pray with their children before the children are able to pray for themselves, Cloyd said. "Begin praying with them so that prayer becomes a second language for the child, a natural language."

Teaching children to pray is one way to overcome the "spiritual poverty" of American children, Cloyd said. Unlike economic poverty, spiritual poverty crosses all classes of children, she said.

American parents must reclaim their place as the primary source of spiritual nurture for their children, Cloyd said. In recent decades, this role has been wrongly abdicated to the "professionals" at churches, she explained.

The role of the church is to equip and empower parents for this task, not to perform the task for the parents, she said.

Cloyd said she began work on her book after hearing from many parents who wanted to teach their children to pray but didn't know how. "I want to teach my children to pray, but I don't know how myself," one mother told her.

Cloyd tells children prayer is "using your own words to speak with and listen to God at any time, at any place about anything."

She offered these additional suggestions for parents:

-- "Remember to call out your child's name in prayer." It's important for children to hear their parents pray for them specifically, by name, she said.

-- Establish a pattern of prayer at specific times every day, such as at meal times or bedtime.

-- Remember that children learn by imitation. "They learn best by seeing our lives of prayer. Children learn far more from what they see us do than from what we say."

-- Teach children to pray in their own words.

-- Encourage older children to find their own special places of prayer at home.

-- Teach children to pray the "great prayers of our faith," such as the Lord's Prayer.

-- Help children understand that God answers prayer, sometimes with a yes, sometimes with a no and other times with a "wait a while."

-- Demonstrate to children that prayer leads to action.

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