

# Associated Baptist Press

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## **CBF missionaries persevere under fire in Albania**

By Robert O'Brien

PRAGUE (ABP) -- Katie Dobbs listened to music and tracer bullets "blend unharmoniously" as tensions built to the explosion point in Albania.

The 23-year-old Texan sat "trapped" in the home of Cooperative Baptist Fellowship missionaries Bert and Debbie Ayers. She had come to Albania on a two-year assignment to teach their three children: daughter, Erin, 14, and 10-year-old twins, a son, Shaun, and a daughter, Kristen.

As weapon fire mingled with music at the Ayers home, a conflict raged inside her. "On the one side," she said, "I see a loving, healthy family trying to carry on normal evening rituals ... juxtaposed to the sounds of foolish, unnecessary violence on the roads outside."

Outside, Albanian citizens wielded firearms, grenades and explosives. "Little boys Shaun's age were walking down the street carrying three or four machine guns," said Dobbs, who kept a daily journal.

"Just how did I get to be so far from home?" she wondered in those chilling hours. "What am I doing here all alone, anyway?"

That thought likely crossed the minds of many Americans evacuated from Albania, including nine CBF missionaries and seven of their children. Besides Dobbs and the Ayers, they are Tony Ricki Buesing, Darrell and Kathy Smith, Rick and Martha Shaw. Mary Ida Buzhardt departed earlier before the airports closed.

Missionaries quickly prepared to leave -- eager to escape violence, sparked by a pyramid-investment scam that stole Albanians' life savings, but sad to leave people they love. "It was almost like bailing out," Dobbs said, although he realized they had no option but to move to a safe place.

Albanian friends and co-workers expressed emotional farewells. The Shaws visited their housekeeper, Shpresa, to pay her, give her food, and to promise to try to see her again one day.

"You have brought me the greatest love I have ever known," Shpresa told them. "I will always treasure that."

Eventually, the CBF group made it to the port city of Durres, where a remarkable series of events confirmed that God would not desert them in crisis, they report from their temporary location at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, the Czech Republic.

Milton Womack, a Houston psychologist and former missionary, and Keith Parks, CBF global missions coordinator, are meeting with them there to help them work through effects of the crisis. The kind of real-life nightmare they experienced can have varying degrees of traumatic effect, CBF leaders say. The effects can surface long after the events themselves subside.

Each person responds to stress differently and must be handled with care, said Womack, director of Willow Drive Community Mental Health Center and president of Cornerstone Programs International, a ministry that deals with mental health matters for religious organizations. "It's important to look for the effects of trauma and to find ways to help them get past it without it becoming a defining event in their lives."

Trauma certainly described the experience of missionaries at the departure point. Debbie Ayers, who earlier had received a superficial scalp wound from a stray bullet, and the twins evacuated -- amid fog, dark and a barrage of gunfire -- in an Italian Marine landing craft late on March 13. The others, including Debbie's husband, Bert, and daughter, Erin, remained behind, separated from them by a surging mob at the dock.

The CBF group and 150 others spent a "terrifying night" on the dock before evacuation the next morning. Gunfire continued through the night. Shells exploded beside the family of a Brazilian Baptist missionary. Once, Erin stood and moved -- and a shell exploded where she had been.

None was injured, but the effect was terrifying as they huddled together through the cold night. "It was the most frightening night of my life," said James Shaw, 11. Other missionary kids, besides the Ayers and James, were Alex Smith, 6; Melissa Smith, 11; and Faith Shaw, 8.

"As the night wore on, our nerves were on edge," said Darrell Smith. He related several dangerous episodes but said he never feared for his life. "There was a peace from God. We realized our lives were in His hands."

Koreans next to the CBF group "began to sing in Korean, 'It is Well with My Soul,'" Smith said. "Despite the language barrier, it was very comforting."

It didn't take Dobbs long to realize she wasn't alone through the ordeal, despite initial fears. "Examples of God's watchful care are so vivid, and my mind turns to a piece of Scripture: "My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand."

One missionary kid was still talking in his sleep about guns and danger as the missionary families settled in at the seminary in Prague and began to put their lives back together. But they feel the terror will pass.

"Their hearts are still in Albania," said Helen McNeely, a CBF missionary based in Berlin who went with her husband, Don, to help the evacuees. "They want to stay as close to it as possible, and they pray they can return."

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## **Pollster Barna finds rise in 'born-again' Catholics**

By Mark Wingfield

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- A growing number of American Catholics could be classified as "born-again" Christians, according to evangelical Protestant pollster George Barna.

In his just-released annual survey of the state of American faith, Barna reports a 41 percent increase over two years in the number of American Catholics who meet his definition of "born-again" Christian.

The findings are significant because Protestants and Catholics traditionally have held different ideas about how a person achieves salvation. In the past, many conservative Protestants have considered Catholics non-Christians who need to be evangelized.

That attitude has been changing in recent years and so too, apparently, has the attitude of many American Catholics.

The apparent shift surprises no one more than Barna, who was raised in the Roman Catholic church but says he was "born again" through the witness of an evangelical Protestant church. Today, Barna attends a non-denominational evangelical church in California.

For purposes of his demographic studies, Barna does not ask people whether they consider themselves "born again." Rather, he classifies as "born again" anyone who affirms two statements:

-- "I have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in my life today."

-- "I believe that after I die I will go to heaven because I have confessed my sins and have accepted Jesus Christ as my Savior."

Overall, 43 percent of the American population fit this classification in the 1997 study, up from 39 percent the previous year and 36 percent the year before that.

This nationwide increase is due mainly to changing answers from Roman Catholics, Barna said. In 1995, only 22 percent of Roman Catholics met Barna's criteria for "born-again" Christians. In 1997, that had jumped to 31 percent. That represents a 41 percent increase in the number of American Catholics who meet Barna's definition of a "born-again" Christian.

This "surge of faith" in the Catholic church, as Barna calls it, means that one-sixth of American adults who meet Barna's definition of "born again" are Catholics.

"Denominationally, Catholics are the second most prolific segment of born-again believers, trailing only those associated with Baptist churches and surpassing the proportion associated with any of the other large Protestant groups," he observed.

Barna said he has not yet studied the exact reasons behind this trend, but he offered two hunches.

First, "there are a lot of different kinds of almost para-church movements taking place within Catholic circles," he said. "There is a great effort to bring Catholics back to the Bible."

Second, "there seems to be a lot more lay involvement in their faith, partially because they now have fewer priests," he said. "This is encouraging a lot of people to rethink some of the old notions and perceptions they had."

Baptist reaction to this demographic shift ranged from pleased to skeptical.

Hal Poe, an authority on evangelism and academic administrator at Union University in Jackson, Tenn., finds Barna's explanation plausible.

"Although most Protestants are unaware of it, there is a phenomenal renewal occurring in the Catholic church," Poe said. "The major growth in Bible study in America is happening among Catholics-because it's new. They are putting Protestants to shame."

This emphasis on renewal and personal Bible study, made possible by Vatican II, is just now beginning to be seen outside the Catholic church, Poe said. "You're going to see dramatic changes in the Catholic church in the next 50 years."

Marvin Anderson, a church history professor at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., meanwhile, said Baptists should be cautious in interpreting Barna's findings on this subject.

Catholics easily could interpret Barna's diagnostic questions differently than evangelical Protestants would, Anderson said. For example, Catholics could view Barna's reference to a "commitment to Jesus Christ" as what happened at their confirmation after completing study of the church catechism, he said, rather than as a specific personal decision to follow Christ as Savior.

Yet Anderson agreed that a renewed emphasis on the Bible and personal Bible study is sweeping the Catholic church in America. "Within that context, there could be some tremendous self-discoveries," he said.

Bill Gordon, an interfaith witness expert with the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, cast even stronger doubt on the way Barna's questions are phrased.

Both questions are "terrible questions as far as determining whether a Roman Catholic is saved," Gordon said. Terms used in the questions such as "commitment," "confessed" and "accepted" don't mean the same thing to a Catholic as to an evangelical, he said.

"This totally ignores the sacramental background most Roman Catholics are coming from," Gordon said.

A Roman Catholic official who relates to the Southern Baptist Convention agreed there might be room for different interpretations of Barna's questions, but he also affirmed that change has swept the American Catholic church in the last 30 years.

"I do think the preaching in the last 20, maybe 30 years has been more evangelical in Catholic churches," said Frank Ruff, liaison to the Southern Baptist Convention from the National Conference of Catholic Bishops. "That's certainly something that has been clearer.

"In popular Catholic conversation, talking about relationship with Jesus is just customary, where we wouldn't have used that terminology 40 years ago," said Ruff, who lives in Franklin, Ky. "I don't know if the reality is any different, but we wouldn't have used that terminology."

Ruff said he doubts many Catholics would interpret Barna's second question -- about going to heaven because of accepting Jesus as Savior -- exactly the same way Protestants would.

For example, the Catholic church does not teach the doctrine of "once saved, always saved" as taught in the Baptist church, he said. If the question means a person is going to heaven because of a one-time commitment to Jesus, as Baptists teach, most Catholics would say no, he explained.

"If, on the other hand, it is interpreted to mean I go to heaven because of my faith in Jesus, then Catholics would say yes. There the emphasis is on what gives me the ability to go to heaven, on how the door gets opened rather than on the assurance that it is opened."

Since Vatican II, the Catholic church has placed a greater emphasis on making a commitment to Jesus, Ruff said.

Catholic worship traditionally assumed parishioners had made an initial commitment to Jesus, and so the focus of preaching was on how to live out that commitment, he said.

But even that has changed now, Ruff said. "I think we've made a big mistake in times past by assuming that most everybody's on the trail."

Regardless of the reasons behind the trend Barna sees, major points of disagreement still exist between Catholics and evangelical Protestants, everyone interviewed for this story agreed.

While both Catholics and evangelicals affirm theological points such as the divinity and humanity of Jesus, the virgin birth and the existence of heaven and hell, they do not agree on issues such as church government, the process that leads to salvation, the meaning of baptism, the role of the sacraments and the person of Mary.

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## **School prayer amendment to be introduced in Congress**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Despite a disagreement among religious conservatives over the proper way to amend the U.S. Constitution, Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., has announced plans to introduce an amendment defending religious practices, including school prayer.

The Religious Freedom Amendment, which will be introduced after Congress returns from its Easter recess, is similar to Istook's proposal last Congress. The key difference is the addition of a phrase prohibiting government from denying a "benefit" on account of religion.

Opponents of the measure say that phrase would open the door to vouchers for religious schools and tax money for churches.

The Istook language reads: "The right to pray or acknowledge religious belief, heritage or tradition on public property, including public schools, shall not be infringed. The government shall not compel joining in prayer, initiate or compose school prayers, discriminate against or deny a benefit on account of religion."

At a March 24 press conference with groups such as the Christian Coalition, Focus on the Family, Family Research Council and Concerned Women for America, Istook said the new amendment "is the only way we can end 30 years of court decisions that turned First Amendment rights upside down."

Istook said: "Courts have gone far beyond outlawing prayer in many public school settings. They have aided a systematic campaign to strip religious symbols, references, and heritage from public view, as part of the attack on the underlying values which mean so much to most Americans."

He said religious expression is being singled out for censorship. "All other types of language, conduct, nudity and even sex acts are being given special protection, while religion and our values are being censored. We must reverse this topsy-turvy and terrible trend, or we will lose the bedrock values upon which America was founded and has prospered."

He was joined at the press conference by Ellen Pearson, a mother of a child who was told by her principal that she could not read her Bible on the bus because of the separation of church and state. After complaints by Pearson, the principal later changed his decision.

The Coalition to Preserve Religious Liberty, an alliance of over 50 national religious, educational and civil liberties, held a press conference criticizing the Istook proposal.

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said the religion clauses in the First Amendment have done a good job of protecting religious liberty. "To the extent that these clauses have not worked well, that they have been misapplied or misconstrued, the answer is education not more legislation," Walker said.

Mark Pelavin, associate director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, answered Istook's suggestion that religious expression is being singled out and treated differently.

"That's the scheme of the constitution. It's the First Amendment which sets out a different set of treatments for religion. Not because religion is less important. Not because we don't value religious speech as highly. But precisely because of the high value we do place on religion, we've given it an elevated place in our constitutional hierarchy. ... It's not a slap toward religion. It's a fundamental protection that religion enjoys," Pelavin said.

Dan Ivins, pastor of First Baptist Church, Silver Spring, Md., said the Istook amendment would make hypocrites out of children for the sake of conformity.

"Prayer is a personal matter. It is both conceived and delivered from the human heart, which is impervious to these folks who would set themselves up to direct the flow of traffic," Ivins said. The Congress should work on issues like bipartisan campaign finance reform and poverty, he added. "What we don't need is people crafting legislation that boils down to mob rule over the human conscience."

Ivins added that it was a "silly" belief that "some little government-sponsored, rote prayer is going to enable our young people to prevail against the gates of hell. This is beyond me."

The coalition's opposition to an amendment has been aided by the feud among amendment supporters over the past two years.

Rep. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., offered a "religious-equality amendment" last Congress barring the government from denying benefits to or discriminating against "any private person or group on account of religious expression, belief or identity."

Several religious groups supported Hyde's amendment over Istook's, including the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and the National Association of Evangelicals.

Istook said the division over the amendments has been resolved. However, the CLC remains opposed to the Istook language and the NAE failed to support the Istook language at its recent convention.

Will Dodson, director of governmental affairs for the CLC, said Istook's language is inconsistent with the principle that "no ecclesiastical group or denomination should be favored by the state more than others" as cited in

a religious-liberty statement in "The Baptist Faith and Message."

Many conservatives groups who oppose the Istook proposal said they might support it if the language is revised.

In a written statement on Istook's proposed amendment, Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich left the door open for later revision. "The legislative process will certainly provide every opportunity for thoughtful review and understanding, so that the best possible language is ultimately approved and adopted," he said.

Supporters of Istook's amendment say the time is "ripe" for a vote on an amendment, citing the recent House vote to support a judge in Alabama who has appealed a ruling that he must remove a display of the Ten Commandments from the courtroom wall.

Ralph Reed, executive director of the Christian Coalition, said, "I don't think there has been a time in decades when we are more poised to advance this issue than right now." Reed said that the coalition has budgeted up to \$2 million for radio ads, targeted voter mail and telephone banks to pass the amendment. Reed said that a vote on the amendment would be placed in the coalition's voter guides.

"There is no issue and there will be no legislation in this Congress that will take a higher priority for us than the passage of this amendment," Reed said.

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## **Lawmakers seek funds for religious groups in bill**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A bipartisan group of congressional lawmakers has introduced legislation that would establish "renewal communities" eligible for tax benefits and business incentives.

The proposal would also provide public money for faith-based drug programs and require eligible communities to participate in a plan to provide vouchers for low-income students to attend public, private or parochial schools.

The American Community Renewal Act of 1997 is similar to legislation introduced by Republican lawmakers last year. The new measure, however, has bipartisan support with Sen. Joe Lieberman, D-Conn., and Rep. Floyd Flake, D-N.Y., co-sponsoring the bill.

"We have a lot less to fear from a former drug addict who's broken his habit because he got faith from a faith-based organization than we have to fear from a drug addict who has not been to a faith-based organization and continues to be drug addicted," Lieberman said.

Republican sponsors include Sen. Spencer Abraham of Michigan and Reps. J.C. Watts of Oklahoma and Jim Talent of Missouri. Abraham said the measure would cost taxpayers \$5 billion over 5 years.

At a House Small Business Committee hearing held March 12, the same day the bill was introduced, Watts said the plan is needed because welfare programs have not alleviated poverty.

"Today many social programs, aimed at helping our youth and the poor, deny moral responsibility and the role of religion. As a result we have failed those we need to help the most." Watts said.

The provision that would allow religious schools to receive government vouchers has ignited a debate over giving public funds to private institutions.

Supporters believe the government should not continue to fund schools that are failing when private and parochial schools are doing a better job at educating children.

Opponents believe that a voucher plan would undermine the public schools by transferring public money meant for public groups to private institutions.

The proposal has also sparked a church-state debate over government aid to pervasively sectarian groups.

Talent said that he would oppose direct grants from government going to the religious schools. However,

Talent said that since a voucher allows parents to choose the school they give it to, there is no constitutional problem.

Barry Lynn, executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State, disagrees. "You cannot build up the nation's inner cities by tearing down the wall of separation between church and state. It is illegal to use public funds to advance religion," Lynn said.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

## **Ban on late-term abortion procedure clears House**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. House of Representatives has voted overwhelmingly to outlaw a controversial late-term abortion procedure except in cases where no other procedure would save the woman's life.

The House voted 295-136 to support the measure which would subject doctors who perform the procedure to fines and up to two years in prison.

The procedure, termed "partial-birth abortion" by its foes, involves partially delivering an intact fetus through the birth canal before killing it.

President Clinton vetoed a similar bill last year because it did not allow exceptions in cases that pose a serious health consequence to the mother.

Opponents of the abortion procedure argue Clinton's health exemption is too broad and would include psychological and emotional health and not just physical problems.

The Supreme Court ruled in 1973 that the health of the mother represents a medical judgment that "may be exercised in light of all factors -- physical, emotional, psychological, familial, and the woman's age -- relevant to the well being of the patient."

Despite that criticism, the House refused to support a motion from Rep. Barney Frank, D-Mass., to send the bill back to the committee to consider allowing the procedure "to avert serious adverse long-term physical health consequences to the mother."

The current bill allows an exception only in cases where the mother's life is endangered and when "no other medical procedure would suffice."

Opponents of the bill say that the measure would violate Roe vs. Wade, a landmark Supreme Court ruling that protected a woman's right to privacy in abortion decisions.

Support for the ban received a boost recently when the executive director of the National Coalition of Abortion Providers admitted he lied last year when he claimed the procedure was used rarely and only on women whose lives were in danger or whose fetuses were damaged.

In a letter last May to then-Southern Baptist Convention President Jim Henry, however, Clinton indicated that how often it is used was not his main reason for vetoing the ban last year.

Responding to a letter from Henry and other SBC presidents criticizing his veto, Clinton wrote, "I do not contend that this procedure, today, is always used in circumstances that meet my standard."

"The procedure may well be used in circumstances where a woman's serious health interests are not at risk," Clinton said. "But I do not support such uses, I do not defend them, and I would sign appropriate legislation banning them."

"At the same time, I cannot and will not countenance a ban on this procedure in those cases where it represents the best hope for a woman to avoid serious risks to her health," he added.

In addition to criminal punishment, the ban would allow civil action by fathers who are married to women when the abortion is performed and, if the mother is under 18, by maternal grandparents. The provision would bar a father who had abused or abandoned the woman from suing.

The Partial Birth Abortion Ban Act of 1997 awaits Senate action. Last year, the House voted to override Clinton's veto of the ban, but the Senate failed to get the two-thirds necessary to override.

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## **Baptist World Alliance opposes Israeli bill**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Baptist World Alliance has joined other religious groups in urging Israeli lawmakers to reject a proposed new law that would outlaw religious proselytizing.

A law being considered by Israel's parliament, the Knesset, would carry a one-year jail term for anyone convicted of activities intended as an "inducement for religious conversion."

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Washington-based Baptist World Alliance, urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to work to "discourage such precipitous actions which send the message to the world of intolerance and lack of belief in religious freedom for all people."

The BWA also asked the United States Secretary of State Madeline Albright "to make sure the Israeli government knows the U.S. government defends the religious rights of all people, even minorities with whom the majority may not agree."

In making what he described as "the strongest appeal" to the Israeli government and leaders of the United States, Lotz said the BWA is standing with the small community of Baptists and the larger, though minority, evangelical community there.

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-- By Wendy Ryan

## **Baptist minister 'outed' in 1995 joins UCC, begins new church**

By Bob Allen

DAYTON, Ohio (ABP) -- A Baptist pastor who two years ago resigned his church because fellow ministers threatened to reveal to his congregation that he is gay has been ordained by the United Church of Christ and is starting a new church in Dayton, Ohio.

Cross Creek Community Church kicked off officially March 22-23, said Mike Castle, senior pastor. A brochure described the church as "seeker sensitive" and an "inclusive community" which "welcomes and invites all people" and does not discriminate on the basis of gender, age, race or sexual orientation.

The new congregation is sponsored by the United Church of Christ, the only major U.S. denomination which approves of the ordination of gays. The church also received a \$3,000 mission grant from the Alliance of Baptists, a 10-year-old group that welcomes gays and lesbians.

Castle said the church's denominational affiliation is the UCC, which has promised funding for three years, and described the Alliance of Baptists as an "ecumenical partner." Castle said 240 people attended services during the new church's kickoff weekend.

Castle quit in March 1995 as pastor of Miami Valley Community Church in Dayton, a Southern Baptist church he founded three years earlier, after fellow ministers in Greater Dayton Association of Baptists threatened to confront the church with information that he is a homosexual.

At that point, he said, the church would have been forced to fire him or be charged with condoning homosexuality, putting the congregation at odds with stated positions of both the Southern Baptist Convention and the State Convention of Baptists in Ohio.

At the time, Castle said he considered himself to be gay but had chosen to minister as a single and a celibate. His sexual orientation had not been an issue for the church, he said, but he resigned to avoid dragging the congregation into controversy.

In contrast, the new church has adopted a posture of "open inclusivity" toward gays, Castle said. In that setting, he said, he no longer feels bound by a commitment to celibacy and has entered into a "union" with a partner.

"I feel like I've been set free to be myself," Castle said of ministering out of the closet. "I feel I don't have to hide, to be afraid."

The ordination of gays is among the most controversial issues in American religion today. Recently it has divided the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) and is expected to be an issue for the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A., when that group holds its biennial meeting this summer.

The Southern Baptist Convention banned homosexuality in 1992, amending the convention's constitution to disfellowship congregations which "act to affirm, approve or endorse homosexual behavior."

An Alliance of Baptists task force on human sexuality two years ago stopped short of endorsing the ordination of gays but said such determinations should be made by local churches and not by denominational organizations.

The statement, which Alliance members "received with gratitude," encouraged churches "to recognize and develop gifts for ministry in all persons, without regard to sexual orientation."

The Alliance, the first of two main groups to distance themselves from the SBC after conservatives took over the denomination in the 1980s, counts among member churches several congregations which welcome and affirm gays.

The Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a larger and more centrist group which formed in 1991 over theological disputes with the SBC, does not have an official position on homosexuality, but the group's Coordinating Council in 1995 defunded the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America after that group took action to declare itself a "welcoming" place for gays and lesbians.

Retaining a tie to Baptists was "very important" to the steering committee planning Cross Creek Community Church, Castle said, adding "we are very proud" of the Alliance connection.

Stan Hastey, executive director of the Washington-based Alliance of Baptists, said this is not the first year that the group's missions offering has included grants to churches which are open to homosexuals. This year, however, all six churches receiving such funds have a pro-gay stance. "I can't remember that happening before," he said.

"We've truly become a welcoming and affirming group as to gay people, there's no denying that," Hastey said.

## **Americans want more religion on prime-time TV, poll says**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Most Americans believe religion plays a greater part in their own lives than in those of the characters they watch on television, according to a poll by the entertainment magazine TV Guide.

Fifty-six percent of viewers surveyed said religion does not get enough attention on prime-time TV, 8 percent said too much and 30 percent said about the right amount.

The TV Guide poll, conducted by Peter D. Hart Associates in Washington, surveyed 804 adults in late February.

More than half of the people in the survey said television handles the issue of religion respectfully -- not offensively -- but only a third thought television was effective at successfully depicting characters' religious sides.

More than half classified themselves as either fairly religious or very religious, and 41 percent said they went to a church or synagogue at least once a week.

Sixty-one percent said they would like to see more references to God, churchgoing and other religious observances in prime time, and 68 percent said they would prefer more spirituality, which TV Guide defined as belief in a higher being but not necessarily affiliation with an organized religion.

Even more -- 82 percent -- said they would like to see more references to moral issues on television.

Sixty-one percent of respondents said they believe television has gotten less spiritual and moral over the last five years.

Asked which of the Ten Commandments is most often violated on prime-time television, 32 percent said the prohibition on adultery and 30 percent said murder.

Respondents said they generally feel morally superior to the characters they watch on TV. When asked to rate the morality of prime-time television characters, respondents handed down an average rating of 46 out of a possible 100. Asked to evaluate their own morals on the same scale, respondents gave themselves an 85.

Asked to choose the most spiritually rich prime-time program, 66 percent chose the CBS program, "Touched By An Angel," currently television's No. 2-rated prime time program. Coming in a distant second was ABC's "Family Matters," picked by 6 percent.

Nearly half chose Della Reese's Tess character from "Touched By An Angel" as the TV character with which they would most like to discuss the existence of God. The second-most popular choice, comedian Jerry Seinfeld, was picked by 10 percent of those polled.

The poll was part of a special report, "God and Television," in the March 29-April 4 TV Guide. Other major magazines also chose religion themes the week preceding Easter.

Time's cover story queried, "Does Heaven Exist?" While preaching about heaven has all but disappeared in many churches, Americans still believe strongly in an afterlife, according to a Time/CNN poll. Eight people in 10 said they believe in heaven. Fewer, 63 percent, meanwhile, said they believe in hell.

Six percent said they believe people get into heaven based mostly on the good things they do, 34 percent said it is mostly by their faith in God and 57 percent said it is both faith and works that get a person into heaven.

Asked what they believe will happen to them immediately after they die, 61 percent said they expect to go directly to heaven, 15 percent to purgatory and 1 percent to hell. Five percent said they expect to be reincarnated while 4 percent said death is the end of existence.

Newsweek, meanwhile, looked at "The Mystery of Prayer." In a poll, 54 percent of Americans told the magazine they pray every day and 29 percent said they pray more than once a day. Eighty-seven percent said they believe God answers their prayers at least some of the time.

Considering the problem of unanswered prayer, 85 percent said they accept God's failure to grant their prayers. Only 13 percent said they have lost faith because of unanswered prayer.

Most (82 percent) said when they pray they ask for health or success for a child or family member. Three in four said they ask for strength to overcome personal weakness. A third said they never pray for financial or career success while 51 percent said they think God doesn't answer prayers to win sporting events.

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-- By Bob Allen

## **Celebrities share favorite Bible verses in book**

By Mark Wingfield

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Ever wonder what Vice President Al Gore's favorite Bible verse is?

Despite his well-publicized efforts to help keep the White House's Lincoln bedroom occupied with Democratic donors, it's not Matthew 25:25 -- "I was a stranger and you took me in."

Actually, Gore's favorite verse is Matthew 7:12 -- "Therefore all things whatsoever ye would that men should do to you, do ye also even so to them: for this is the law and the prophets."

Gore is one of 365 public figures who cite their favorite Bible verses and expound upon them in a new devotional book compiled by Art Toalston, editor of Baptist Press.

"Lamp Unto My Feet" features a brief devotional for each day of the year. Each day's entry cites the contributor, the Bible verse that has been the most pivotal in his or her life and a few words of explanation.

Contributors range from the political to the religious, and from athletes to scientists.

Toalston said he got the idea for the book after astronaut Dave Leestma carried a microfiche Bible on the space shuttle Atlantis in 1992.

"I began wondering what verse or verses of Scripture this astronaut might cite as pivotal to his life," Toalston writes in the introduction to his book. "Then I began wondering what Scriptures might be pivotal to other Christians in the sciences -- and in the entertainment industry, government, business, sports, the arts, education and other fields."

So Toalston began writing well-known people of faith and asking them what verses of Scripture meant the most to them. Ultimately, he received replies from enough people to fill the year-long devotional book.

Participants include Mary Kay Ash, Pat Boone, Bobby Bowden, Brett Butler, Jimmy Carter, Johnny Cash, Roy Clark, Van Cliburn, Charles Colson, Adolph Coors IV, Dave Dravecky, Millard Fuller, George Gallup Jr., Billy Graham, Jerome Hines, Tom Landry, Art Linkletter, Marilyn McCoo, Deborah Norville, Rosa Parks, Dan Quayle and Mister Rogers.

Some give simple explanations; others relate more lengthy stories. All reveal a bit of their personal journeys as Christians.

Rosa Parks cites Psalm 23 and tells how she learned this passage as a schoolgirl and how it gave her strength during the Civil Rights Movement.

Today show weatherman Willard Scott cites Matthew 5:9 -- "Blessed are the peacemakers: for they shall be called the children of God."

Jimmy Carter cites Ephesians 4:32 -- "And be ye kind one to another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God for Christ's sake hath forgiven you."

Adolph Coors IV, an investment adviser who 20 years ago left his family's brewing business to pursue a different definition of success, cites Matthew 16:26 -- "What good will it be for a man if he gains the whole world, yet forfeits his soul? Or what can a man give in exchange for his soul?"

Pat Day, perhaps Kentucky's best-known jockey, cites John 3:16 -- "For God so loved the world that he gave

his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish but have everlasting life."

Out of the 365 entries in "Lamp Unto My Feet," a few naturally duplicate verses, although the book includes references from Genesis to Revelation. Thirty-two verses are cited more than once, but only eight are cited by more than three people.

The most popular verse, Proverbs 3:5-6, is cited by 17 people: "Trust in the Lord with all thine heart, and lean not unto thine own understanding. In all thy ways acknowledge him, and he shall direct thy paths."

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## **Depression not sinful, Christian counselor says**

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Is it a sin to be depressed?

No, stressed a veteran Christian counselor. But he acknowledged many people believe feeling blue is a blight on their faith.

"Depression does not reflect a person's faith experience, commitment to Christ or obedience to God," said Glenn Booth, coordinator of the Texas Baptist Ministers Counseling Service.

"That's what people sometimes think," he reported, noting Christians often come to him and say, "If I were a person of faith, I could get over this."

"A lot of pressures, tensions, illnesses and stressors can depress a person," Booth explained. "Depression is the holistic body -- mental, emotional, physical and spiritual -- responding to life circumstances. Not all of us have the same capacity for handling depression."

Two types of depression afflict people, he said.

Clinical depression is a reaction to a chemical imbalance in the body, he added. Clinical depression often is helped by medical treatment.

Most people, however, occasionally suffer from less-severe situational depression, Booth said.

"Most of us are 'depressed' because things aren't going right," he related. "Our dreams are shattered; our goals are blocked. Perhaps we lost a job and can't pay all our bills, our marriage is under stress, or a child is in jail or pregnant out of wedlock.

"As a result, we feel down, blue, depressed."

Clinical depression "can be very debilitating," Booth said. "A clinically depressed person can come to the point where he doesn't want to face the world anymore." Such a person needs the help of a physician, he added.

But situational depression, no matter how bad it feels, is temporary and not fatal, he insisted, noting people who suffer from situational depression can move forward and live productive lives.

"Situational depression often is helped by accepting the fact depression and disappointment are part of life," he said. "By deciding to go on despite feelings of depression, you often don't feel it as intensely as before."

Most of the depressed people helped by Ministers Counseling Service -- and most people helped by their ministers -- suffer from common situational depression, Booth reported. Like everybody else who doesn't have a perfect life, they get out of bed and get on with living, despite their troubles.

And they may find solace from the Bible, particularly the poems found in the Book of Psalms, he said. Booth recommends Psalm 77 as an aid for people battling situational depression.

"The writer is 'crying out to God for help,'" he said, quoting part of the first verse. "'Is God hearing me?' the writer asks. It's like he's trying to grab hold of a lifesaver and grasped nothing."

The writer describes four characteristics common to depressed people today, Booth noted. They are insomnia, an anguish so deep the person cannot talk to others about the problem, the inability to think of anything but the problem and a deep sadness.

The writer also expresses four feelings depressed people commonly express about God, he added. The writer questions God's mercy, love, promises and grace.

Psalm 77 honestly expresses how depressed people often feel, he said, noting the depression causes them to doubt God.

"In my belief system, I know there's grace and mercy, and God promised never to leave," he said, citing a quote he hears often. "But now I don't feel it. Is my belief system real?"

"This describes the sense of hopelessness a person in depression feels. He's had about all he can take."

Ironically, that point of utter hopelessness is the place where the psalmist -- as well as faithful people who fight situational depression -- turn to God, Booth stressed.

He advises depressed people to follow the same course of action the psalm writer took to climb out of depression:

-- "Affirm God, despite how you feel," Booth said.

"In the psalm, we have a man who vividly describes the pain, sleeplessness, futility and anxiety of depression," he explained. "And yet he began to affirm God, despite how he felt.

"You can't always depend on your feelings for being a good thermometer for what God is doing in your life. We often associate feelings with what is real. We may feel abandoned by God, but what we believe -- what we know about God -- tells us that's not real."

-- "Pray to see God in the midst of the 'enemy,' in this case depression," Booth urged.

He recalled a story from the sixth chapter of the Book of II Kings in the Old Testament, where a servant of the Prophet Elisha panics because the city is surrounded by enemy soldiers. Then Elisha prays for the servant to see God's presence in the midst of those enemy soldiers, which he does.

"The secret was not for the enemy to go away, but to see God," Booth said. "Sometimes, we spend so much time praying that depression would go away, when we should be praying that we would see God in the circumstances.

"When you feel God's presence the least may well be when he is closest to you."

-- Rely on your belief that God will not fail you and affirm God's presence in your life, Booth insisted.

Even when depression feels like a formidable enemy, the Christian's ability to handle it increases when God's presence is acknowledged, he said.

"The changing agent is faith," he added. "It's not how much faith we have, but where we point it. We often point it toward our feelings rather than toward our belief system -- where we know God is present."

He cited the writer of the Book of Hebrews in the New Testament, who said faith is "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen."

"Faith is claiming what God has promised, even though we don't feel it," he said. "And even though our situation may not change, our ability to cope with it does.

"In depression, we tend to get tunnel vision, to focus on only the one thing that is bothering us. But when we exercise faith, we focus on the bigger picture, and we can handle the situation better."

Booth's prescription for handling depression "doesn't diminish the intensity of the feeling," he said, but it stresses the temporary nature of the circumstances. "Depression will not entrap us forever."