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ABP board revises current budget, increases fund-raising activities

By Barbara Denman

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Associated Baptist Press entered its seventh year of operation in Jacksonville, Fla., by honoring founding board members and searching for new sources of revenue to fund the news service's expanding operations. Established in July 1990, ABP has been based in Jacksonville since May 1991.

During its semi-annual meeting April 4-5 at the Jacksonville Marriott, the ABP board trimmed its 1997 operating budget by 5.5 percent, stepped up its fund-raising efforts, and heard reports on the well-being of the organization.

The cutting of \$18,000 from its current budget was necessitated by an anticipated \$24,000 drop in income from the financially plateaued Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. As a result the board revised its 1997 basic budget from \$322,000 to \$304,000.

During his report to the board, Greg Warner, ABP executive editor, noted that although one long-term goal was to "reduce our dependency on CBF funding, we didn't intend to accomplish that this soon or this way." Warner noted that CBF contributions compose about 42 percent of the revised 1997 basic budget, compared to more than 50 percent in recent years.

The drop in CBF funding led the board to increase its fund-raising efforts. The board approved a detailed plan to build public awareness of the organization, begin an annual fund, cultivate gifts and solicit foundation grants.

A plan was unveiled to link churches sympathetic to ABP with their cities' daily newspapers by underwriting the cost of providing the news service to the religion editor. Another plan identified five to 10 cities where ABP awareness events could be held in 1997-98.

In other reports, Bob Allen, ABP associate executive editor, told board members that reprinting of ABP stories in Baptist state papers dropped slightly to 2,341 in 1996 from 2,395 in 1995. However, the number of distribution outlets increased to 230 in April 1997, when compared to 222 in the fall of 1996. These outlets include state Baptist papers, dailies, Baptist agencies, individuals and churches.

The most-reprinted 1996 ABP story was on televangelist Jerry Falwell's denial that he was joining the Southern Baptist Convention. Other top-used stories were on evangelist Billy Graham receiving the a Congressional award, California pastor Rick Warren declining the presidency of the North American Mission Board and the resignation of a European seminary president.

A content analysis of ABP stories indicated government and politics provided the most fare for ABP writers, composing 20 percent of the new service's content. Other subject distribution included: state conventions/agencies, 13 percent; social and ethical issues, 12 percent; SBC and agencies, 12 percent. Five stories on SBC politics comprised less than 1 percent of the 646 stories carried in ABP.

But the most animated discussion among the board was reaction to a report by the Association of State Baptist Papers that surveyed state Baptist paper editors about their opinions of ABP and Baptist Press.

Among the 17 editors responding to the 25-question survey, ABP ranked high in accuracy, balance, depth, relevance, timeliness and journalistic quality. Its lowest ranking (6.7 out of a high of 10) was objectivity. The editors rated ABP higher than BP in each category.

The introduction of the report noted that although the survey was "not designed to be a competition between the news services, it is interesting to note that state Baptist papers publish 85 percent more BP articles than ABP articles, yet the editors rate ABP higher in every category, including accuracy, balance and quality. Those findings indicate that many state Baptist editors struggle with the same issues of bias and pressure that the news services do."

Ed Vick of Raleigh, N.C., expressed concern about some unsigned comments by polled state papers editors that were included in the report. "The unkind things said bothered me, the tones of the comments," Vick said.

Don Sharp of Chicago added it was "scary," when editors made decisions while "fearful of political repercussions."

Marv Knox of Dallas defended the findings of the report, noting that even with the "maliciousness" of the comments, "ABP came out ahead."

Noting that he had learned some lessons from the report, Warner said ABP editors will offer "constant monitoring" of ABP copy to ensure "terminology is fair and not pejorative." He indicated that the ABP staff plans to "draft a follow-up instrument of our own."

During a dinner, several founding board members were honored for their vision and service. They were Sharp, Catherine Allen of Birmingham, Ala.; Anna Bannister of Augusta, Ga.; Carl Kell of Bowling Green, Ken.; Don McGregor of Mesquite, Texas; and Al Shackelford of Nashville, Tenn.

The next meeting is set for Sept. 19-20 in Memphis, Tenn.

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Baylor establishes center for ministry effectiveness

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- A new center aimed at enhancing effective ministry will be established at Baylor University, officials at the school in Waco, Texas, have announced.

Baylor's Center for Ministry Effectiveness, to be established in conjunction with the Baptist General Convention of Texas, will exist "to support Christian ministers to carry out their callings effectively," according to a purpose statement.

"The goal is to help minister to ministers," said James Williamson, acting dean of Baylor's School of Education. "There is a great need for human service programs for ministers and their families. We will help develop such programs and provide faculty assistance in such areas as counseling and educational psychology."

The center will draw on resources from several areas of the university, including George W. Truett Seminary, the department of religion, the School of Education and the office of denominational ministries.

The center will be directed by Winfred Moore, former longtime pastor of First Baptist Church in Amarillo and now a visiting professor in ministry guidance at Baylor.

The center particularly will help ministers avoid "burnout," Moore said.

"We hope to be a preventative force before that burnout stage ever begins," he said. "The center will provide a place for common dialogue among ministers to discuss their problems. This is a much-needed program for ministers who are having those inner struggles."

Moore said he hopes to begin the center, which will be open to all denominations, "as fast as possible."

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-- By Marv Knox

Baptists sending aid to Liberia

McLEAN, VA. (ABP) -- With a 10-year civil war in Liberia apparently winding down, Baptists are stepping up to aid returning refugees.

Rebel groups in the country have disarmed, leading to hopes that an election planned May 30 may at last lead to long-term peace and stability in the country.

Baptist World Aid, a division of the Baptist World Alliance, has pledged a grant of \$15,900 to Liberian Baptists to provide food, medical care, clothing, shoes and cooking utensils for distribution to refugees.

In a recent meeting at BWA headquarters in McLean, Va., Liberian Baptist leader Emile Sam-Peal asked Baptists worldwide to continue relief operations for "those who have survived this nightmare."

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-- By Paul Montacute

Book introduces kids to world religions

By Mark Wingfield

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- "Mom, Julie wasn't at school today, and the teacher said it's because this was a religious holiday. Why don't we celebrate that holiday?"

Would you know what to say if your child or grandchild asked such a question?

Faced with an array of religions in America's multi-cultural society, children increasingly are becoming curious about the ways their friends and schoolmates worship, according to retired Baptist missionary William McElrath. And the average parent doesn't know enough to answer all the questions, he added.

That's one reason McElrath, an educator and former missionary to Indonesia, has written a new book titled "Ways We Worship." The hardback volume has just been released by Barron's, a major publisher of reference books and textbooks.

The book is designed as a ready reference for both children and parents. It's also the kind of book parents and children can use together to create learning experiences out of real-life questions, McElrath said. "Just as you meet a kid who goes to worship on Saturdays or who won't eat pork, that might be a good time to go to that part of the book."

The book is organized into three major sections: religions that worship one God, religions originating from Asia and other religions found on every continent. Specific chapters are devoted to Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, Taoism, Shintoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Sikhism. Other religions treated include a variety of primal religions, such as those observed by Native Americans, and newer religions, such as Mormonism.

McElrath said he wrote the book in a straightforward style, explaining the basic tenets and worship patterns of each religion, but he scrupulously avoided citing one faith as good and another as bad.

Even so, some readers may question the book's organization. For example, Mormons consider themselves a Christian religion, yet McElrath's book follows the belief of the larger Christian community and does not include Mormonism in the section on Christianity.

He uses this and similar conflicting opinions to explain to readers how adherents to various religions often perceive themselves differently. For example, he writes about the Nation of Islam considering itself a true form of Islam while many Muslims would disagree.

The book takes its title, "Ways We Worship," from McElrath's premise that while it may be hard to categorize religions and explain exactly what people believe, it is easier to describe the ways in which people worship.

McElrath said writing the book gave him a clearer picture of similarities and differences in the world's religions. "I learned that the world of religion is full of look-alikes, some of which are alike and some of which aren't."

Even though the book does not favor one religion over another, McElrath said he is pleased the book makes a clear presentation of Christianity. "There's a very clear gospel witness in the Christian chapter. It's very simple and Spartan, but it's there."

McElrath predicted the new book will become popular among both young and old readers because of its simplicity. It is written on a fifth-grade reading level.

The same thing happened with a children's Bible dictionary McElrath wrote several years ago, he said. "Sunday school teachers come up to me and say, 'That's what I use because the regular Bible dictionaries tell me more than I want to know. Yours tells me what I really need to know.'"

McElrath and his wife, Betty, served as Southern Baptist missionaries in Indonesia from 1964 through 1994. They now live in Raleigh, N.C. A native Kentuckian, he is a graduate of Murray State University and Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

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Dodii cancer cards add dose of realism

By Joyce Sweeney Martin

LA GRANGE, Ky. (ABP) -- After her mother was diagnosed with cancer, Cindy Plewinski counted on sending get-well cards as a way to span the miles between them.

But finding sensitive yet realistic cards proved impossible.

"Nothing seemed appropriate for what she was facing," Plewinski said. The racks of typical get well cards seemed hollow and inadequate. She found nothing that combined hope, humor and faith.

Then, an idea came.

One day on the drive back to Kentucky after a visit with her mother in Virginia, the words "Dodii" -- her mother's childhood nickname -- and "chemocards" came to mind.

Plewinski thought she had found a simple solution: buy some card stock and draw a few stick-figure cards for her mother.

Instead, those two words became the catalyst during the next two years for Plewinski to quit her job and begin Dодii Inc., a company that designs, manufactures and distributes greeting cards, dolls and clothing with cancer patients specifically in mind.

But turning the idea into a product line wasn't easy.

At first, Plewinski said, she thought the whole thing was "preposterous."

She was a nuclear medical technologist, not an artist. She knew nothing about printing, composing, drawing or launching a business. And, at 47 years old, she didn't relish the thought of beginning a new career.

For about a year, she "argued with the Lord," she said. "I told him, 'Surely you can find someone better equipped.'"

But the idea persisted. "It wouldn't leave me alone," she said.

Finally, she gave in. She said she told God if he would send people to help her, "I'll do it."

She cut back on work hours and began searching for people to share her passion.

The first person besides her husband whom she told about her dream died of cancer a short time later. "I was at ground zero or below," she said. "I had shared with one person besides my husband, and she died."

Three more months passed as Plewinski puzzled over how to turn the dream into reality.

She asked family members to try to draw her idea of Dодii. "I wanted Dодii to be a symbol of hope and love in the scary time of cancer," she said. "No matter the mood, I want to laugh when I see Dодii." But family members couldn't capture her idea, she said.

One night, almost in desperation, she dropped by a shop in LaGrange, Ky., that displays work of local artists. She thought she might find artists there who could help her, but none were there that night.

"I was the lowest ever," she said. But, somehow, she mustered the courage to share her dream with shop owner Mim Vance Stoess. Stoess, like Plewinski, is a member of DeHaven Memorial Baptist Church in La Grange.

Immediately, Stoess caught the vision. She said she knew someone who could compose verse. She also knew an artist and a marketing agent. Moreover, they all are Christians, she said.

That night, for Plewinski, the preposterous become possible.

The next day, Plewinski met with the artist, Dave Thomas. Immediately, he caught the vision. Using Plewinski's face as his model, he drew the character who would become the company's logo and submitted it for trademark. When health problems forced him to curtail activities, he signed the copyright over to Plewinski, calling it "seed in your ministry," she said.

Within a few days after Thomas resigned, Stoess had found another illustrator: 23-year-old Christy Scheider. She, too, had been affected by cancer. At age 8, her twin sister, Stephanie, was diagnosed with brain cancer. "The Lord had given the girls a Scripture promise that Stephanie would live, and she did," Plewinski said.

Plewinski met Shirley Schureck, the woman who would compose the verses for the cards. Schureck, an accountant, had just completed chemotherapy herself.

At their first meeting, Plewinski said, she thought Schureck "didn't get it." But she was wrong. Within a few days, Schureck came to her with 60 verses.

Plewinski's mother developed the acronym for Dодii: Defender of Dignity in Illness.

Plewinski had her artist and her composer. She had her logo. Now, she had to get the drawings onto cards.

Again, Stoess came through. She turned to her nephew, David Gower, a graphic artist who turned the artwork and printed copy into a finished product.

One more hurdle remained: marketing the cards.

Again, God used members of DeHaven Memorial Church to meet that need, Plewinski said.

Jim and Jo Markham introduced Plewinski to author Danny Cain. When Plewinski showed Cain the cards, he cried. He had lost four family members to cancer. He said he already was planning for his next project to center around cancer caregivers. Looking at the cards, he said, reminded him of things he had not dealt with.

Plewinski knew Cain understood her concept. She wanted Dодii products to help the person giving them as much as the cancer patient receiving them. She wanted Dодii to "open up communication, to deal directly with the issue," she said.

A few months later, Cain became her marketing agent. He encouraged Plewinski and her husband to take a course for entrepreneurs offered by the Louisville Chamber of Commerce. There, they learned how to write a detailed business plan. Plewinski went full-time with Dодii Inc.

On Nov. 1, 1996 -- two and a half years after her mother's cancer diagnosis -- the Dодii line of cards went on the market. While the verses on each of the 36 cards varies, the basic message is the same, Plewinski said. "The message is, 'I love you. I've been where you are. There is hope.'" Scripture is included on each card. T-shirts, sweatshirts, hats and dolls are available also.

No one is more pleased than her mother, Plewinski said. At 73, Doris Overman is a cancer survivor who is excited about the ministry potential of the company, Plewinski said.

The company is not just a card company, "it's a mission," Plewinski said.

She dreams of getting the endorsement of a pharmaceutical company that would purchase Dодii dolls she could give to cancer patients. The dolls would open the door for a "prayer visit" with them, she said.

"I'm a caregiver. That's where my heart is," she said. "I can't wait for that part" to come true.

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EDITORS NOTE: Currently, the Dодii line of cards and products is available in retail stores only in Kentucky. For information on ordering out-of-state call (502) 241-6742.

CLARIFICATION: In the April 2 ABP story, "Home Mission Board workers being notified of layoffs," please replace the 12th paragraph with the following.

Officials have said the merger will not affect the almost 5,000 field missionaries currently supervised by the HMB. According to a NAMB organizational structure released in February, more than half of headquarters staff will work in media and evangelism.

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