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In this issue:

Prayer, not presidency, focus of pre-SBC meeting, Elliff says

By Greg Warner

ATLANTA -- A group of 60 to 65 men -- most leaders of the conservative movement in the Southern Baptist Convention -- met May 5 at an Atlanta hotel for an invitation-only prayer meeting called by Tom Elliff, current SBC president.

"The basic theme running through the meeting," Elliff said, "was a desire to see God move when we meet in Dallas" for the June Southern Baptist Convention.

Although similar pre-convention gatherings in the past have tapped nominees for the SBC presidency, Elliff said this year's meeting was for prayer only. "The focus for the meeting was prayer for revival."

Elliff, pastor of First Southern Baptist Church in Del City, Okla., is expected to be elected without opposition to a customary second term as SBC president June 17. However, already there is some talk among conservatives about who will succeed him in 1998.

But Elliff, who issued the invitations for the five-hour meeting, told participants at the outset that prayer and not politics would be the only agenda. Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, said afterward that Elliff's stipulation "was absolutely adhered to."

Paige Patterson, often mentioned as Elliff's likely successor, said the meeting was "notable for its non-political nature."

"Not everybody has an ulterior motive for everything they do," added Elliff. "Some people just like to pray."

Participants said they prayed for the spiritual condition of the Southern Baptist Convention and its churches. The men also shared "concerns for the theological recovery of our denomination at every level and our concern for the full recovery of biblical truth and theological reformation in our churches," said Mohler, who was one of several participants who delivered brief messages.

Several former presidents of the Southern Baptist Convention attended, including Adrian Rogers, pastor of Bellevue Baptist Church in Cordova, Tenn., and Jimmy Draper, president of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, who both spoke, and Jerry Vines, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jacksonville, Fla.

At least one former president was not invited -- Jim Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church of Orlando, Fla., whose election in 1994 broke the string of hand-picked conservative presidents and signaled a departure from the tightly controlled election process that has prevailed since 1979.

Elliff confirmed Henry was not invited. He said the group included some former presidents, SBC agency leaders and pastors but that not everyone could be invited. He did not indicate how the invitees were selected or how many.

Some leaders say a rift remains between the inner circle of conservatives, who have played a pivotal role in selecting presidential candidates, and conservatives who supported Henry, who would like to see the presidential election process loosened up. Other leaders say the rift is being healed.

The real test will come next year, when Elliff's successor is chosen.

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary and one of the architects of the conservative movement, said he has not made up his mind about being nominated in 1998. "If I had a leaning, it would probably be in the direction of not doing it," he said.

When conservative leaders met last year to pick their nominee, Patterson and Elliff were the top two choices. Patterson deferred to Elliff that year. But that made him an obvious consideration for 1998.

Some Southern Baptists would object if an SBC agency head also served as convention president, since that could be seen as a conflict of interest. That hasn't happened since 1940.

But Patterson said the bigger issue for him is division within the conservative camp over his prominent role in the movement. "That would be difficult for some people," he said. Electing Patterson could deepen the rift between the conservatives' inner circle of leaders, whom he would represent, and those like Henry calling for a wider circle of leadership.

"I would need to know two things: that God wanted it and that there was a pretty broad consensus among both groups and others that that's what should happen," he said.

"I would have to be awfully certain that that's what God would want me to do before I would do that."

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Golden Gate professor, president differ over financial 'emergency'

By Bob Allen

MILL VALLEY, Calif. (ABP) -- Officials at Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary exaggerated a financial crunch in the seminary's music school in order to pressure two tenured faculty members to resign, claims one of the two.

The seminary's president, William Crews, meanwhile, insists the decision was based on a financial "emergency" in the school of church music but acknowledges a long-running philosophical dispute between faculty and administration.

Presented with numbers showing a "financial emergency" facing the Dixon School of Church Music, trustees of the seminary in Mill Valley, Calif., voted April 8 to shut down the program at the end of July.

In a second vote by telephone poll April 19, however, trustees voted to reverse their earlier action after learning that two long-time faculty members, Craig and Beth Singleton, had offered to resign if it would allow the music school to remain open. The trustees unanimously adopted a substitute motion calling for the school to be restructured to "make it financially viable" rather than closed.

In an interview, Craig Singleton, a member of the music school faculty since 1980, disputed that there is a financial "emergency" at Golden Gate. He suggested the budget picture presented to trustees was intended to force current faculty members, who could not be fired due to tenure, to either resign or see the music program shut down.

Singleton has struggled in the past with Crews, who became president in 1986, over the philosophy of music education. Crews, a conservative former pastor and seminary trustee, has pressed for the music school to embrace more contemporary worship trends such as the use of so-called "praise choruses." Long-time faculty members appointed under Crews' predecessor have resisted straying too far from the seminary's focus on traditional church-music styles.

"Generally our whole music faculty has said we believe the basis of the curriculum should be a traditional approach with some contemporary emphasis there," Singleton said. "That is at odds, in my judgment, with what the administration would like. They were preferring a more specifically contemporary approach."

That difference was behind the decision in 1995 to replace Singleton as director of the music program with fellow faculty member Gary McCoy, said Barry Stricker, the Singletons' pastor. A seminary news release at the time said McCoy would lead the school in adding "leadership in contemporary approaches to diverse music, worship and ministry styles" to its "traditional" music-education program.

Crews said McCoy took over the music program because Singleton, who had served in annual appointments since 1983, was taking a sabbatical. Because some program goals required longer than a year, McCoy was given a two-year appointment, he said.

Stricker, pastor of Tiburon Baptist Church, said the Singletons "represent a different model" of church music than the one the administration would prefer. "And it is not a popular model these days."

The Singletons "believe people ought to be classically trained in music and those people can do any kind of music," Stricker said, adding that success of the program's alumni demonstrate the wisdom of that approach.

Crews acknowledged philosophical differences and "some personality issues" were elements of the trustee decision to close the music school but said "the basis of the decision was the financial emergency in the music school itself."

Crews said declining enrollment in the music school suggests that churches are not interested in the type of training preferred by professors.

Crews said the traditional style pushed in Golden Gate's music school remains popular only in a few churches, particularly ethnic congregations, while others are rejecting traditional styles for more contemporary forms.

"It's a philosophical debate: Do we keep trying to do what we think is right or do we do what the churches want? We struggle with that."

"The bottom line is when you've got one program that is financially out of balance as we believe this one was, you have to ask yourself, 'Do we keep on doing this or do we find some other way to do this?"

"Our judgment was what we were doing was not being that well received and it was costing us considerable money, and we had to find ways to do it differently."

Most trustees were not privy to discussions over style between faculty and administration, Singleton said, but reacted solely to financial information that portrayed a financial emergency in the school of church music.

Those figures "put the music school in the worst possible light," Singleton said. When he first saw the budget, he said, he asked an academic officer, "Are you trying to close the music school?"

Officials project the music program's deficit to run just under $71,000 this year, roughly 1 percent of the seminary's $5.5 million budget. Adding in overhead costs, which Singleton said "will be here whether we are here or not," the projected deficit rises to $187,468.

Singleton does not deny the music program is financially strapped, but he claimed the term "emergency" overstates the problem. "My own belief is it was a financial problem, not a financial emergency," Singleton said.

Were the numbers presented in a different fashion, however, Singleton insisted most Southern Baptists would be persuaded the expenditure is valid because of the school's unique missionary potential.

The music school, which currently enrolls 25 students, "has no ethnic majority," Singleton said, and alumni serve around the world. "You can't put a price on the kind of mission we have in the school of church music," he said.

In past years, administrators have concluded the music school was important enough to continue, Singleton said. This year, however, the budget was recast so that each academic unit would have to pay for itself, something the music school could not do "without a major influx of cash."

Pleas by the music faculty to present the budget in a different way -- "not to deceive the trustees" but "to say this ministry is so important we want to support it" -- were ignored, Singleton said. So were less-drastic measures, such as staggering course offerings, reassigning music faculty to other classes, and increasing student fees.

The "next official happening," Singletons said, was the April 8 decision by trustees to close the school, effective July 31.

"We were in some kind of shock," Singleton said.

A week later, Mike Dixon, a benefactor whose parents gave a $1.6 million charitable trust to the music school in 1993, intervened to ask if there might be a way to keep the music school open.

Beth Singleton wrote a note to Crews, Craig Singleton said, saying the couple would be willing to discuss whether the couple's resignation would allow the school to remain open. Crews responded that he would like to explore the option, Singleton said.

After further discussion with Dixon, a separation agreement was drafted. Crews agreed in principle, then polled trustees by telephone, who unanimously approved a substitute motion to restructure the music school to make it "financially viable."

A seminary news release described the trustee action as being prompted by the "voluntary resignations" of Craig and Beth Singleton, a term their supporters find bitterly ironic. "We felt if we did resign that would at least solve what they [trustees] felt was a financial emergency," Singleton said.

The Singletons' other options, he said, were simply to allow the school to close or to seek to reopen the program through legal action. The latter option "didn't seem feasible or right," he added.

Resigning "was the least bad of all the decisions," Singleton said. "This way the school's ministry still has a future."

Since all four of the music faculty had tenure, administrators were frustrated in their effort to change the school's emphasis, Singleton said. The seminary's faculty and staff manual allows termination of a tenured faculty member by resignation, retirement or dismissal.

Grounds for dismissal are incompetence, moral delinquency, failure to perform duties properly or departure from basic tenets of faith, Singleton said. Under those standards, no grounds existed to release any current faculty, he said.

Stricker said he accompanied Singleton to a meeting two weeks prior to the trustee meeting in which Crews asked the Singletons to resign, citing both financial issues and philosophical issues.

At the close of the meeting, Stricker said he asked Crews what would happen if the Singletons refused to resign. "He pretty confidently said his feeling was the trustees would shut down the school of church music," Stricker said.

Crews recalled the conversation in more general terms. "There is no way I could choose an individual faculty member and say, 'You've got to resign,'" Crews said. "I did say to him in order for it to be financially viable it would be necessary for up to two members of the music school faculty to resign."

Stricker criticized the seminary's treatment of the Singletons. "They have been treated in a way that is very unethical," he said. "What has happened is based on a great number of misrepresentations."

Crews said the music school's financial problems have been discussed for seven or eight years and that efforts to build enrollment had failed.

"We're not against music. That's not the issue at all. The issue is what do the churches need and what are they willing to take from the seminary. ...

"I'm in churches all the time. I talk to pastors. What we appear to be doing wasn't high on a lot of people's list. ... Our judgment was we needed either to basically change what we were doing or leave it to the colleges and universities to train the musicians. That is what most seminaries do."

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Representative says welfare changes 'cut too much' out of food programs

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Last year's welfare-reform package went too far, say some members of Congress who voted for it but are now sponsoring new legislation that would restore some funding of food-assistance programs slashed in last year's plan.

Rep. James Walsh, R-N.Y., said some provisions in the food-stamp program he voted for in last year's welfare-reform package were "just too harsh." Walsh is one of four original co-sponsors of a new food-assistance bill with Reps. Tony Hall, D-Ohio, Marge Roukema, R-N.J., and Eva Clayton, D-N.C.

The "Hunger Has a Cure Act," introduced April 30, would restore $7.5 billion over five years from the nearly $27 billion cut out of food programs in last year's welfare-reform package. It would fund various food programs, including the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), food stamps, child-nutrition aid, aid to legal immigrants and other assistance to emergency food banks, soup kitchens and food pantries.

Walsh said last year's welfare reform was good and made a lot of necessary changes but "went too far" and "cut too much" in certain areas. "We knew that there were things down the road that needed to be worked on," Walsh said. He cited a provision in last year's package that limits food stamps for unemployed adults to three out of 36 months as "too harsh."

Roukema called it "criminal" that a country as wealthy as America would tolerate hunger among children. She said that the welfare reform was "right on target" but noted that it is common to go back and revise a major bill and clear up "loopholes."

"Hunger is not a partisan issue," she said. "A mother who can't scrape together a square meal for her two children or a father who doesn't have a regular paycheck have more important things to worry about than ... budgetary constraints and spending rescissions. Hunger has a cure. This is it."

Clayton called the measure an "opportunity for us to right some of the wrongs of the 1996 welfare-reform bill that reduced food-stamp allocations to children, the disabled and the elderly."

In the last Congress, members "agreed that our welfare system needed reform," she said. "And we were right. But reform should be directed at moving people out of poverty, not into poverty."

Bread for the World sponsored a press conference to announce the legislation and helped draft the bill's language. "We are convinced that hunger will not have a cure unless the federal government does its part," said David Beckmann, president of the anti-hunger group.

More than 50 national organizations were listed as endorsing the bill, including Children's Defense Fund, Second Harvest and the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union.

The measure would:

-- Provide food-stamp benefits for needy unemployed adults who are willing to work but unable to find a job. It would allow unemployed adults to receive food stamp benefits for six out of 12 months (instead of three out of 36 months). It would exempt these adults from the time limit on food stamps if a job is not available. The measure adds $100 million per year in new funding to states to create workfare or other program slots for recipients. This would cost $3.4 billion over five years.

-- Exempt three groups of legal, noncitizen immigrants from the welfare law's permanent ban on receiving food stamps -- children under age 18, immigrants over age 75 who have been lawful U.S. residents for at least five years and immigrants who become disabled after entering the country. This would cost $2.5 billion over five years.

-- Increase funding for WIC. The bill calls for an additional $76 million in WIC for 1997 and $278 million more for 1998.

-- Provide $45 million to distribute through The Emergency Food Assistance Program, which supports the nation's network of food banks and soup kitchens.

-- Provide additional funds for child-nutrition programs such as summer meals, school breakfasts and programs for snacks at child care centers.

A spokesman for the House Appropriations Committee, which Walsh chairs, said supporters hope to include the new funding in the balanced-budget agreement. If not, he said the bill faces an uphill battle with possible roadblocks that include the Agriculture Committee and "conservative members of the Republican caucus who do not want to revisit the welfare" reform package.

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Voucher plan for religious schools tossed out by Ohio appeals court

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- An Ohio appeals court has struck down the nation's only active program that allows students to use tax-funded vouchers to attend religious schools.

Reversing a lower-court ruling, Ohio's 10th District appeals court said the voucher program enacted by state lawmakers in 1995 violates the First Amendment's requirement of church-state separation, as well as provisions of the Ohio Constitution.

The Ohio legislature enacted the pilot voucher program after a federal court ordered the state to take over administration of the troubled Cleveland City School District.

The program provided "scholarships" of up to $2,500 for students to attend "alternative" schools. Students whose family incomes was not more than twice the federally established poverty level could receive up to 90 percent of their tuition while those from higher-income families could receive 75 percent of their tuition.

During its first year of implementation (the 1996-97 school year), about 2,000 scholarships were awarded. About 80 percent of the 53 private schools signed up to participate were sectarian. No public-school systems adjacent to the Cleveland district agreed to participate in the program.

Two groups of taxpayers filed suit charging that the program violates the federal constitution's requirement of separation of church and state, as well as several provisions of the Ohio Constitution.

Franklin County Common Pleas Judge Lisa Sadler sided with state officials. She said the voucher program resembles programs upheld by the U.S. Supreme Court in which the benefit to a religious school is indirect and results from the private choices of aid recipients.

Reversing Sadler's ruling, the appeals court acknowledged "that no scholarship aid reaches sectarian schools unless parents choose to enroll their children in such schools."

But the total lack of participation by public schools, coupled with the high percentage of sectarian schools in the program, leaves parents without a meaningful choice, the appeals court said.

"The only real choice available to most parents is between sending their child to a sectarian school and having their child remain in the troubled Cleveland City School District," the court said. "Such a choice can hardly be characterized as 'genuine and independent.' Rather, such a choice steers aid to sectarian schools, resulting in what amounts to be a direct government subsidy."

The appeals court concluded that the voucher program provides "direct and substantial, nonneutral government aid to private schools" and "has the primary effect of advancing religion."

Wisconsin has also enacted a program allowing vouchers to be used at religious schools in Milwaukee, but courts have blocked its implementation.

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Willow Creek driven by culture, not gospel, says conservative critic

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Having endured years of criticism from the left wing of American Protestantism, the influence of Willow Creek Community Church now is being questioned from the right.

Danny Akin, vice president for academic administration at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has charged the suburban Chicago megachurch is driven by culture more than Scripture.

"Contemporary, fallen culture is now setting the theological agenda and determining church polity and policy at Willow Creek. The end result can only be tragic," Akin wrote in the May issue of Jerry Falwell's National Liberty Journal.

Akin particularly took Willow Creek to task for allowing women to serve as elders and ministers, charging the church with a "feminist agenda."

"Few movements have inflicted more pain and damage on the American family and society than has feminism," Akin wrote.

After attending a Willow Creek seminar in 1995 and studying the church, Akin said he concluded Willow Creek has "bought into the lie of modernity with its women elders, and it has rejected the clear teaching of Scripture."

Akin contrasted Willow Creek's position to his own: "God created men to be men and he created women to be women. God created men to be husbands and daddies who lead, provide and protect. God created women to be wives and mothers who nurture, support and care. ... Men and women are ontologically and essentially equal before God. Both are his image bearers. However, by divine decree and creational order, God has assigned men the weighty assignment of leadership both in the home and in the church. No amount of bizarre biblical interpretation can set aside the clear teaching of Scripture at this point."

Akin also criticized Gilbert Bilezikian, a sort of theologian-in-residence at Willow Creek who has been influential in the life of Pastor Bill Hybels. Akin cited an interview in the conservative "World" magazine in which Bilezikian "revealed that Willow Creek not only will not hire to its ministerial staff anyone who is not committed to a feminist/egalitarian agenda, but they now discourage the same from seeking church membership."

In a separate article in the same issue of Falwell's newspaper, Paige Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary, wrote a front-page critique of Bilezikian's influence on the translation committee for the New International Version of the Bible. Patterson's critique is based on the same "World" magazine interview cited by Akin.

In that issue, "World" reported that the translation committee has voted to make the NIV's language "gender-neutral" in future U.S. editions, perhaps as early the year 2000.

Citing Bilezikian's influence at Willow Creek, Patterson asked: "What will be next at Willow Creek -- openness to same-sex marriages, even more openness to the killing of preborns in the wombs of their mothers? Who knows? One thing is for certain, all these things are frequent riding partners of the feminist gang."

In a recent interview with Religion News Service, Willow Creek Pastor Hybels talked about his church's position on women in ministry.

"We encourage women to identify and develop and use their spiritual gifts," he said. "We don't restrict any office or position in the church on the basis of gender."

He confirmed that Willow Creek has a position paper on this issue circulating right now as a working document. "It gives a biblical defense for encouraging women to identify and use their spiritual gift in the church without restriction on the basis of gender," Hybels explained.

He said the document does not reduce the issue to "a few proof texts." Instead "you have to take a systematic view of Scripture to give adequate treatment of this particular matter," he said.

This emphasis at Willow Creek will affect the evangelical world positively, Hybels predicted. "In far too many churches, women grow up feeling like second-class citizens. ... Many of these women yearn to get in the game. They want to roll up their sleeves and participate in the ongoing redemptive drama of God and the world through their local church, but they're being told that they have to stay on the bench because they were born female instead of male, and I think that's very sad."

Hybels said Willow Creek welcomes in its congregation people who disagree with this position. However, he is seeking to have the paid staff "unified in this position," he said.

Elsewhere in Akin's article, he expressed concerns about other ramifications of what he called Willow Creek's "faulty biblical exegesis," "unsound theological reflection and commitments" and "hyper-cultural sensitivity."

Specifically, he charged that Willow Creek:

-- Does not have a traditional Sunday-school program, substituting instead home meetings "that may be little more than group therapy."

-- "Has not distinguished itself for expositional preaching and doctrinal commitments."

-- Has not spoken out against abortion, homosexuality, same-sex marriage and racism.

-- Has a vague process of church membership.

-- Offers optional modes of baptism.

-- Fails to give a "gospel invitation" in its weekly seeker services.

Willow Creek is a non-denominational church that has been highly successful in reaching unchurched people in the metropolitan Chicago area through its so-called "seeker" services, which feature contemporary music, drama and preaching. More than 16,000 people attend Willow Creek services every weekend.

Thousands of U.S. churches have studied the Willow Creek model and implemented some of its practices. Southern Baptists reportedly are among the most frequent attenders of Willow Creek seminars.

In the RNS interview, Hybels said that although Willow Creek is a non-denominational church, it falls in line theologically with U.S. evangelicals. "We would fall right in line with the Billy Graham (Evangelistic) Association or Wheaton College or any of these classic evangelical institutions," he said. "Our statements of faith would probably be almost identical."

In the past, Willow Creek's critics mainly have come from the left. Leaders of mainline Protestant churches and some Southern Baptist moderates, who view Willow Creek as theologically conservative, have charged the innovative church with forsaking important church traditions just to accommodate the unchurched. Past critics especially have focused on Willow Creek's contemporary music style and "seeker" worship.

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Speech by gay-rights activist embroils BSU in controversy

PORTALES, N.M. (ABP) -- A guest lecture in a religion class by a gay-rights activist has created a controversy for the Baptist Student Union director and religion-department chair at Eastern New Mexico State University.

News reports of the April 17 lecture by Mel White, author of "Stranger in the Gate: To Be Gay and Christian in America," sparked questions by local Baptists about views held by Glenn McCoy, the BSU director and religion professor whose salary is paid by the Baptist Convention of New Mexico.

White was a ghost writer to such well-known evangelicals as Billy Graham, Jerry Falwell, D. James Kennedy, W.A. Criswell and Pat Robertson before professing his homosexuality in 1993. Afterward, he was installed as dean of Cathedral of Hope Metropolitan Community Church in Dallas, the nation's largest gay-lesbian church.

He was invited to the university in Portales, N.M., by the University's Diversity Committee, ENMU Students and Legislative Support Awareness, the Associated Students of ENMU and the Alliance Organization, the campus' gay-lesbian group.

Prior to his main lecture, White spoke to two classes, including McCoy's New Testament course, which is normally held at the campus Baptist Student Center.

McCoy told media he did not extend the invitation but was asked by another faculty member to allow White to lecture in his class. On the advice of supervisors, he moved the class from the BSU property to the university library. He opened the class to area pastors and about a dozen attended, according to the Baptist New Mexican.

Despite such efforts to minimize the controversy, some local pastors said they wondered about the BSU's stance on homosexuality. "Because it was Dr. McCoy's class, it still appears we are condoning Dr. White," Tom Rush, pastor of First Baptist Church in Clovis, told the Baptist New Mexican.

Bob Brown, pastor of First Baptist Church in Texico, was quoted by the Portales News-Tribune as saying: "It would be our stance that Dr. White's position was heresy. ... It would be our stance that we didn't want our students exposed to it."

McCoy said he believes homosexual activity is sinful but the classroom lecture was intended to help students deal with issues they face "in the classrooms and in dorms" every day.

"In 34 years of campus ministry and Bible teaching, I have attempted to prepare Christian young people for life in the real world," McCoy said in a prepared statement. "The real world is not ideal. We have to face some things that we would rather were not there. But to close our eyes to the presence of these things will not make them go away. ... I have felt that it was better to permit students to face controversial topics in an atmosphere of support and guidance than it would be to face the same issues in an atmosphere of confrontation and helplessness."

The controversy could jeopardize the BSU's financial support from Eastern Baptist Association, which is facing a budget shortfall and last year rejected a proposal to cut the BSU's monthly funding from $600 to $200. Because of the controversy, "several pastors" are questioning continued funding of the BSU, said association moderator Dean Turaville.

After an April 29 meeting with associational leaders, McCoy and W.A. Bradshaw, New Mexico Baptists' student-ministries director, issued a statement to the Baptist New Mexican expressing "regret" that White's speech became "a divisive issue."

"We apologize to all who were offended in the process," the statement said, adding that, "Our desire will always be to defend our position on moral issues in open dialogue."

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-- By ABP staff, based on reporting by John Loudat.

Actor who plays Bonhoeffer draws strength from his example

By Marv Knox

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Al Staggs identifies with Dietrich Bonhoeffer, both professionally and personally.

One identification is obvious: For about a decade, Staggs has staged a one-act, one-actor play based on Bonhoeffer, a Christian who died as a martyr during World War II.

Bonhoeffer, a German pastor and theologian, was hanged in a Nazi prison camp in 1945 for his participation in a conspiracy to assassinate Adolph Hitler.

Staggs wrote his play, "A View from the Underside," and portrays the martyr on a stage set in Bonhoeffer's prison cell hours before his execution.

Bonhoeffer was a cultured, well-educated young man from a wealthy family, Staggs noted. He traveled widely, and friends begged him to stay in the United States rather than return to Germany shortly before the war.

And yet Bonhoeffer chose to return to his homeland, to minister in difficult circumstances, to speak out against a ruthless regime -- all because he felt the call of God, Staggs marveled in an interview.

As a minister, Bonhoeffer felt compelled to serve the people whom society lightly regarded, Staggs noted. Rather than a life of ease in exile, Bonhoeffer thrust himself into the cauldron of controversy.

"The thing Bonhoeffer said that has struck me most deeply is, 'I've learned to view life from the perspective of the outcast, the oppressed, the maltreated, the prisoner and the poor -- in short, from the perspective of all people who suffer,'" Staggs said.

And that brings Staggs to a more personal point of identification with Bonhoeffer. Both have been acquainted with suffering.

Staggs' wife, Vicki, first battled cancer a decade ago. That adversary returned a few months ago, forcing her back into treatment and once again plunging the family into the agony known by cancer patients and their loved ones.

"When I'm performing this drama, I do think about some of the adversities Bonhoeffer was thrust into, and just because he was a Christian he was not exempt from the painful realities of life," Staggs said.

"For me, that is a comfort in our own context of dealing with cancer. In the midst of facing death and powerlessness and the uncertainties of each day, he nevertheless ... really trusted God with his day-to-day existence and his future. ...

"Despite all he endured, he believed all of it, as (the Apostle) Paul says, was for good. It was not all good, but it was for good. There was a purpose for all of it. And that's how his pilgrimage has given me strength."

Other identifications are broader and less painful.

Staggs, who first studied Bonhoeffer as a Harvard divinity student in the early 1980s, admires his bravery.

"He displayed extraordinary courage," Staggs recalled. "When it seemed a huge majority of Christians in Germany were being taken in by Hitler's ... pogroms, Bonhoeffer was one of the distinct minority who spoke prophetically against what was happening to Germany."

"He basically said you can't continue to do church as if there is nothing unjust going on" as Germans exterminated the Jews and other minorities, Staggs said. "He said that the injustice that prevails in society is an indictment against the church's silence."

Although Bonhoeffer was a pacifist, he came to see that assassinating Hitler would be a "lesser evil" than allowing Hitler to continue his rampage, Staggs said.

So, Bonhoeffer risked -- and ultimately lost -- his life trying to prevent further suffering of the oppressed, Staggs noted.

Lessons from Bonhoeffer's life apply to Christians today, he added. "Our profession of faith [in Christ] should be more than just a matter of words. He [Bonhoeffer] spoke disparagingly of 'cheap grace,' grace without discipleship. It must be more than words; deeds must follow."

Bonhoeffer's life also challenges "cultural Christianity," said Staggs, who was pastor of Woodland Baptist Church in San Antonio until 1994, when he went full-time with his performance ministry.

Bonhoeffer's life teaches "we need to be careful about our patriotism," Staggs explained. "Our loyalty to our nation is part of our Christian witness, but it never is equal to our allegiance to God.

"God has no national favorites. The Germans thought they were God's favorites, and if we're not careful, we can be led to believe we're God's special people. But if we do not do righteousness and justice, we will suffer God's judgment."

And Bonhoeffer's example addresses Christian responses to issues in the United States today, Staggs said.

For one thing, Bonhoeffer would support the separation of church and state, he stressed.

And another, Bonhoeffer would have sharp words to say to welfare reformers who forsake the poor, he added.

Bonhoeffer would "call a lot of the religious community on the carpet for their unwillingness to stand up for economic justice," Staggs insisted.

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-- Photo available on request.

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