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Gore announces group to help workers make transition, keep jobs

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Vice President Al Gore announced May 29 the creation of a coalition of religious groups and community organizations to help welfare recipients keep the jobs they find and make the transition from welfare to work.

The Welfare-to-Work Coalition to Sustain Success will work with state governments and private businesses to identify available resources and provide support and mentoring that new workers need to adjust to the workplace.

The coalition is the second group formed by the Clinton administration to help implement welfare reform. In May, President Clinton announced the formation of the Welfare to Work Partnership, a coalition of companies committed to hiring welfare recipients.

Gore said the groups are two interlocking pieces of the same puzzle. "Together, they will work to help welfare recipients find jobs, keep jobs and sustain success," he said.

The coalition has 18 charter members, including the Baptist Joint Committee, the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and the Southern Baptist Woman's Missionary Union.

Gore said a record 2.8 million people have moved off the welfare rolls over the last four years and the administration has pledged to move another 2 million off over the next four years.

He said officials have learned that "the transition from welfare to work is far more complicated and difficult than some had thought."

Gore identified two problems with the transition. The first is helping welfare recipients find jobs. "The second problem that hasn't gotten as much attention but is just as critical ... is making sure that the person who gets a job has the skills and the support that they need to keep those jobs."

Studies have shown that large numbers of welfare recipients lose the jobs they get within 12 to 16 months, Gore said.

Some lose jobs because they can't get health benefits, he said, so they return to welfare for Medicaid benefits. Others lose jobs, he said, because they haven't learned simple skills such as interacting with other workers, dealing with anger or the importance of showing up to work on time.

"Welfare recipients, as a group, often simply do not have the support system that many of us take for granted," Gore said. "Without those support systems, simple problems become major obstacles."

At the announcement, Gore led the first of several tri-monthly discussions to showcase successful mentoring and training programs. Members of the panel identified health care, child care, workplace attitudes and isolation as major problems that welfare recipients face.

One panelist launched a group that has become the model for the welfare-to-work coalition. John Sharp, Texas comptroller of Public Accounts, spearheaded the development of Family Pathfinders, a group in the state's office that matched mothers on welfare with religious and civil groups.

Churches and civil groups agree to train three-to-eight people to adopt a welfare mother for a year and aid her in making the transition from welfare to work. The group has matched 188 mothers with mostly religious groups.

Phil Strickland, executive director of the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission, has worked closely with Family Pathfinders. He attended a meeting at the White House recently to discuss plans to form the coalition.

Strickland said the program is "an appropriate enabling relationship between the government and religion. This is not funding ministry. This is helping to link needs and resources," Strickland said.

A WMU spokeswoman said the women's group is involved primarily because of the Christian Women's Job Corps formed by the WMU in 1993. Trudy Johnson, WMU special projects manager, said the program "changes the lives of women who are struggling to provide a better life for themselves and their children."

In a statement, Johnson said the program "has been seen by the leaders of our nation as a model for impacting one of our nation's most challenging problems. The sequence of events serve as a testimony to what God can do when we are obedient to his prompting."

Gore told Associated Baptist Press the program does not entangle church and state. "This is not a program where the federal government is passing an appropriation," he said. "There are, in fact, programs that already have appropriations where civic groups and religious organizations qualify to participate.

"But this is about groups of people in congregations pairing up, five and six at a time, with a welfare family, making a commitment for a year or more to help that family meet the needs that must be met in order to make the transition into the workplace."

The Baptist Joint Committee is involved, said Brent Walker, general counsel to "steer the project clear of the entanglement that would result if government funded church positions."

"We see this as a permissible alternative to churches using government funds to hire former welfare recipients," he said.

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Individuals, churches contribute to 'chasm' between faith and work

By Lacy Thompson

ROME, Ga. (ABP) -- Americans tend to compartmentalize their lives into secular and sacred, while churches are more interested in internal programs than helping individual members incorporate their faith into the workplace.

That leads to a chasm between worship and work which ought not exist, contends Ross West in his book on integrating faith and work.

"In the New Testament, separation between clergy and laity does not exist," West wrote in *Go to Work and Take Your Faith, Too!* "Indeed, all Christians are clergy in the New Testament. ... All people of faith -- laypersons included -- are ministers. All people of faith are charged with the task of Christian service. ...

"Laypeople are to be every bit on mission in their secular jobs as professional clergy are to be in their work."

Contributing to the chasm, West said in an interview, are competing values between the church and the workplace. Faith emphasizes values like love for God and others, while the world of work values competition, independence and the bottom line.

Some Christians attempt to resolve that dilemma by compartmentalizing, dividing their lives between public and private, said West, a former Baptist pastor and denominational worker who now heads a consulting company in Rome, Ga.

"Work is in the public sector and guess where religion is?" he said. "The private sector. So that's one of the biggest culprits."

Churches are also to blame, he said, because they tend to view themselves as the "center of the universe."

"There's some talk in the church that it's important to live your faith wherever you are," West said. "But what is communicated through the church's actions is the idea that what's really important is what takes place here on our property in the times in which we meet and in the events that we sponsor. So I think we have neglected this whole area a great deal."

That idea is illustrated, West said, in the different reactions he gets when he talks to groups about incorporating faith into the workplace. "Laypeople generally say, 'At last, somebody understands what we're up against in the world of work.' Ministers, while they may be sympathetic, tend to say, 'What's all the fuss about. After all, it's our programs that are really important.'"

"But the reality is that we're in a world in which the church is no longer the dominant community organization," West said. "In some sense, every time we go outside the door of the church, we're in a mission field. And we need to remember that a big part of the time we spend in that mission field is in the workplace."

Churches lose credibility when they fail to equip and enable members to use their faith to influence the workplace, he said.

"I think we lose credibility with the people who are already involved in church because the idea is if what I'm experiencing here doesn't relate to where I spend a third of my life, then why is this such a big deal and why should I participate in it as wholeheartedly as other people think I ought to.

"Then the same thing carries out to folks who we're trying to reach. We just start looking like another little group, another subculture that doesn't really relate to life."

Individual Christians and the church must work together to bridge the chasm that exists between faith and the workplace, West contends.

The church must begin by acknowledging it is not to be "the" central focus, he said. "We have to re-focus our perspective. ... We have to see that it's the world to which we are to minister and not just to and within the church. That's the big thing."

Churches must begin to find and create ways to affirm, equip and support persons as they go into the world with their faith, he said.

For example, he cited a Presbyterian church in New York which makes it a point to affirm the calling of all members as ministers. It is working to launch support groups that allow people in the same or similar areas of work to gather for prayer and biblically-based discussion of issues they face.

Other churches sponsor weekday lunches and discussions for members of the secular working world. And a Presbyterian church in California sponsored a service in which members brought symbols of their work -- calculators, tools, uniforms, schedules -- and placed them on a table as a sign of dedication. Church leaders then prayed over the items -- that they be used by the members for God's causes.

Another key is to plan and schedule church programs with secular workers in mind, West noted. This includes making sure that planned activities are needed and scheduling them at times when the largest number of people are able to attend, he says. It also means not heaping guilt on members who are unable to attend events.

Finally, the church can learn to listen to its members, West says. "In fact, providing opportunities to listen to people of faith tell their stories may well be the most important thing churches can do to help them," he wrote. "Listening is the beginning point for whatever other approaches the church decides to employ."

As with the church, the challenge for the individual in the workplace begins with a re-focus of perspective -- that he or she is a minister and that God is present in the workplace.

West and other experts suggest drafting a personal mission or purpose statement.

"I think a lot of people -- Christians included -- just kind of meander through life without any sense of real purpose or without trying to develop a purpose that encompasses all of their lives," he said

West urges Christians to live by faith values in the workplace and in all of life. That involves making ethical choices, being scrupulously honest and making fair decisions with people in mind, he said.

He also encourages Christians to make helping others a key goal in their work, to use their skills well and to seek to create beauty and order wherever they work -- whatever kind of activity their work involves.

In addition, West said it is absolutely necessary for Christian workers to relate to others as fellow human beings and with a sense of their value. Unfortunately, too many Christians almost "check their faith at the door" in terms of how they relate to others, he adds.

Learning to listen to others and caring about their lives is a key ministry, West said.

"A lot of times we want to tell other people what we think they ought to do when we've really not listened to them sufficiently to find out where they are to begin with," he noted. "Unfortunately, the dominant image that Christians have in the workplace is that we are judgmental. Learning to listen is one antidote to that."

West also urges Christians to "lighten up" and learn to laugh (but not at the expense of others); to set healthy life priorities; and to practice personal Christian disciplines, such as prayer, taking physical care of one's self, working to grow mentally, refusing to let money dominate one's life and participating in a community of faith.

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Head of Louisiana state police found calling by 'trial and error'

By Lacy Thompson

PINEVILLE, La. (ABP) -- As a preacher's kid growing up in Louisiana during the 1950s and 1960s, William "Rut" Whittington recalls spending years in a "hideout mode" from fear of being called into ministry like his father.

Lacking such a clear calling in life, Whittington says God instead used a "trial-and-error" method of nudging him toward his recent appointment by Gov. Mike Foster as head of the Louisiana State Police.

Whittington, whose father taught 25 years at Louisiana College, joined the Marines after high school. He left the service to attend college at the Baptist school in Pineville. After graduation, he re-entered the Marines, then later began a master's degree at Louisiana State University. There he decided to join the Marine reserves, which happened to have a military police unit in Baton Rouge.

From there, he ended up as an investigator with the attorney general's office and a year later as a state trooper.

"None of these were things I was looking for," he recalls. "It just sort of seemed to happen. But I look back now and think perhaps the Lord was there working things out."

Whittington was encouraged to seek the office on earlier occasions but says it was not until Foster's election in 1995 that he felt sure he would be permitted to do the job with the high moral standards that have marked his service.

"When I interviewed with him [Foster] personally in December 1996, the way he started the conversation was by saying he would never ask me to do anything that is either illegal or immoral," Whittington recalls. "And he never has."

Whittington says his commitment to honest service is grounded in his faith and was established early in his career. "It really went back to a lot of those lessons taught by my parents and in church. I hate to say it, but at that time my faith and witness had a great deal of work that needed to be done. But I look back now and see that all of that foundation was there, so to me there was really only one way to do something like this -- and that was the right way. It's a place of service and honest service. And anything less than that was unacceptable."

It is a philosophy Whittington seeks to teach to everyone on the state force. He calls it "Whittington's Leadership Theorem."

If a state trooper possesses the "Four Cs" -- character, competence, commitment and compassion -- minus the "Two Cs" -- corruption and cronyism -- and if they have a steady moral compass to guide them in making decisions, their service will be true and honest, Whittington explains.

Whittington says he bases his views on his understanding of the biblical assertion that government is ordained by God. "Now, that's scary to me. It means we're a servant, so I think we'll be held to a higher accountability for our type of service. ...

"So I've told everybody that this is the way I'm going to operate, this is the way I want them to operate, this is the way I want them to evaluate our service. ... Every time our troopers have to listen to me for a few minutes, I'm pushing this thing."

Whittington also pushes the idea of each trooper being a leader, noting they are given two very big powers -- to take a life in certain circumstances and to restrict a person's liberties. "And if we're going to deal with those things, we need to do so honorably."

One of the things Whittington quickly decided was not important was the infamous quota system that required troopers to write a certain number of tickets. He scrapped the idea immediately and told troopers to concentrate more on helping people. After all, most of the dealings a trooper has are with ordinary people just trying to get through life, Whittington says. "So we tell them, 'help them get through that day.'"

Meanwhile, Whittington says he gets through his days by believing his ability to do the job comes from God. "I very much understand that I'm overwhelmed in this job. It's bigger than me. I can't do it alone. So it's forced me to go to the Word and to pray more. And that's been good for me in the sense that if things are going well for you and you don't feel challenged, then generally you think you're doing okay on your own. But this is so overwhelming that I know better than that and I know I need help."

Whittington also speaks of the need to get "re-churched" and "re-energized" on weekends, when he travels back to Pineville and teaches Sunday school at Kingsville Baptist Church. And he talks in terms of Ephesians 6 and of putting on the armor of God -- including what he refers to as a scriptural ammunition belt. "I'm not a big memory guy, but I have several specific reaffirming scriptures in my memory -- and that's part of that suiting up everyday and putting on that armor and getting ready for battle."

Whittington admits he underestimated the difficulty of changing things. But he also offers the assurance that change will prevail. A case in point is the ongoing effort to clean up the gambling mess in Louisiana. Whittington says what he wants is the same thing a homeowner wants -- a certificate saying his structure is free of termites.

"Our position from the start is there's only one way and that's the right way. And if folks are disturbed because we're going through records and such, they just need to get over it. The public is entitled to good honest service and good honest organization and we need to have that assurance."

In addition, Whittington admits he probably has underestimated the nature of evil, failing to see it as an intentional force. "I just saw it as sort of a basic thing out there. ... But if the devil is indeed out there -- and we're told in the Bible that he is -- and if he is conducting a campaign against us more or less, then we need to make sure we prepare for that just like you would in a military sense. Because there's a whole lot of difference between being up against some vague, ill-defined threat and being up against an enemy that plans and operates against you and looks for weak points and exploits them. ... I think I have just been a little bit naive about what we're up against in general."

On the other hand, Whittington says he is optimistic about what is happening in Louisiana. "Being around my dad and mother so many years, I know what good really is. I know a lot of people just can't measure

up to that. But I'm amazed by some of the people I'm serving with down here and their spiritual depth. I'm not sure why the Lord has developed an intense interest in Louisiana, but I'm convinced that something big is going on here. ... Whatever it is, we have a chance here. And I've been around too long to think it's coincidence."

Whittington also believes his place in life is more than coincidence. He says he admires people with stirring testimonies, such as a friend who was saved in the middle of a naval battle in the Pacific Ocean. "I wish I could come up with something like that, but mine has been more of a slow, plodding."

Whittington does recall that at a revival service when he was 16 years old, he turned his back "on some kind of tug, whatever it was, and just refused to let go of that stadium seat."

"So whatever it was, I just didn't do it and I think I probably ended up on a secondary track," he says.

But then as he considers the twists and turns his career could have taken and looks at the opportunity before him, he adds: "I think this thing really worked out to where I'm probably where I need to be. I'm careful not to ascribe too much meaning to stuff, but as I look back, it just seems like a lot of things happened that I can't explain ... but that factored in to allow for preparation now to serve in this capacity.

"It's really unbelievable. And whatever it is, it is humbling to me. Because just in the event it was important enough to the Lord to work some of these things out, I had better be serious and take care of business now."

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Pastor says prayer, commitment help revitalize California church

By Mark Wyatt

GRAND TERRACE, Calif. (ABP) -- "Something new on the Terrace" is more than just a slogan Terrace Crest Baptist Church used to promote its new identity for a grand opening on Easter Sunday.

Pastor Paul Reed calls the church's history "a case study of a near-death experience."

Reed, a former missionary forced by a chronic illness to return to the United States in 1995, initially consulted in areas of education and creative ministries at what was then First Baptist Church in Grand Terrace, Calif.

Within a few months the church's pastor resigned to start a new church. Reed stepped in as a supply preacher, then as interim pastor. When the search committee asked him to become permanent pastor, the church removed "interim" from his title. He became pastor on Christmas Eve 1995.

Reed learned the church had closed and restarted twice before. At times the congregation had experienced modest growth, Reed said, but more than one instance of "sin in the camp" resulted in a subsequent decline and growing disrepute in the surrounding community.

Reed had been senior pastor just two weeks when he uncovered yet another "financial indiscretion and cover-up" by a former leader. He resolved to settle the issue following terms established in Matthew 18. That included notifying the congregation.

The disclosure came as a staggering blow. Attendance and offerings plummeted. The church fell several months behind in its mortgage payments. Paying other bills became a struggle.

After consulting with the local association's director of missions and the senior pastor of First Baptist's mother church, Reed presented church members with two options. The first was to shut down, sell the property to settle all debts and give the local Baptist association anything that was left over. The alternative, Reed said, was to revert to mission status and submit to the authority of Immanuel Baptist Church in Highland.

Reed set two additional conditions for the second option: 1) the Bible would be the congregation's "standard for life and practice" including church discipline; and 2) "shared ministry" would be their model.

"After a time of fervent prayer the church voted unanimously to revert to mission status and do whatever it took to see God be glorified in our body," Reed said.

A steering committee immediately began addressing the congregation's needs, financial and otherwise. The sponsoring church provided a grant and helped secure a new loan to erase the delinquent payments and pay for remodeling the Grand Terrace congregation's run-down facilities. Additional financial assistance came from Calvary-Arrowhead Association, California Southern Baptist Convention and California Baptist Foundation.

Volunteer labor for the project included 80 college students and 30 adults from Lubbock, Texas. The group spent their spring break sprucing up the church with fresh paint and building new dressing rooms for the baptistery.

One member told a local newspaper the church was getting a "face-lift that would make Liz Taylor jealous."

As Easter approached, church members received training as greeters, welcome table workers and altar counselors. Others trained to serve in preschool and children's classes.

"On Easter God blessed us with 173 in our morning worship," Reed said. Afterward, Terrace Crest members followed up by visiting and giving copies of the "Jesus" video to all of the first-time visitors who were present.

Since then, attendance at worship and Bible study has increased steadily with a pronounced multi-cultural flavor that reflects the area's ethnic diversity. Membership has grown by 15 -- four of that number by baptism, Reed reported.

Reed said he believes the Terrace Crest experience can be a model of revitalization for other declining churches, but only if they are willing to learn seven key lessons:

-- The importance of brokenness. "For God to work the way he worked at Terrace Crest," Reed said, "a church must be willing to be broken for him. This includes swallowing pride and admitting the need for help."

-- The importance of prayer. As the revitalization of Terrace Crest began, church members set aside Wednesday evening services exclusively for prayer. "I believe God blesses and honors a commitment to prayer," Reed declared.

-- The importance of a committed sponsoring church. Reed said Immanuel Baptist Church in Highland is a model in terms of its commitment to complete support of the mission church. "This includes spiritual, financial and logistical support," he explained.

-- The importance of a mature pastor. Although Terrace Crest is Reed's first pastorate, he values the experience he gained as a missionary. "I can't imagine having to face what I faced here without a lot of experience and a good measure of spiritual maturity," Reed said.

-- The importance of strong staff relationships between sponsoring church and mission. Reed, who joined Immanuel Baptist Church in 1967, said he had "a head start in this area" thanks to his long-standing and close spiritual relationship with Pastor Rob Zinn and others there. "In order for God to have the freedom to work, personal pettiness and strife must not interfere," Reed said.

-- The importance of associational support. "The director of missions sets the tone for this" in terms of financial and personal support, Reed said. Paul Wilkerson, Calvary-Arrowhead director of missions, is "one of the best," he added.

-- The importance of denominational support. Reed is convinced that without the financial assistance it has received from the state convention and Southern Baptist Home Mission Board, "Terrace Crest would still be in a very difficult financial condition."