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With a grieving nation as backdrop, conference considers reconciliation

By Teresa Dickens

COVENTRY, England (ABP) -- In a country devastated by the loss of a beloved princess, some 400 Christians from 16 nations gathered to call for acts of reconciliation worldwide.

Delegates to the conference, entitled Reconciliation '97, gathered in Coventry, England, as the world mourned the death of Diana, Princess of Wales, who was killed in an automobile crash Aug. 31 in Paris.

The conference was held Sept. 1-7 at Coventry University and Coventry Cathedral, which was bombed during World War II and has become a center of reconciliation in the years since the war.

The meeting was organized by an interdenominational network of people interested in reconciliation ministry, led by Reid Hardin, retired director of lay renewal for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board.

Initially, delegates were concerned Diana's death might cast a pall over the meeting. But in the end, organizers said they came to believe their presence in the nation was providential.

Throughout the conference, local residents and tourists alike flowed through the cathedral to sign books of condolence and to pray. Many paused to stand and listen to conference testimonies and music. At least one woman made a profession of faith.

Frank Boyd, general secretary of the Southern Baptist Association in Southampton, England, said the country's response to Lady Diana's death represented the "deep spiritual hunger" in Britain.

"We are living in a post-Christian environment," he said. Requesting prayer for his nation, Boyd said: "For the past 20 years or so the message of the gospel has been falling on stone ground. We have a great need for reconciliation with God and each other."

Throughout the week of plenary sessions, forums and workshops, speakers emphasized that revival and renewal will only come after reconciliation among Christians.

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"Christians must come together to form an invisible power of one," declared Raleigh Washington, senior pastor of The Rock Church in Chicago and a vice president of Promise Keepers. "When believers from all over the world come together, then the world will know that Jesus Christ is Lord."

"Our unity is one way we signal to the world, many of whom are skeptical, that we are credible people," said David Laubach, executive director of evangelism and renewal for the American Baptist Churches, USA.

However, speakers emphasized, reconciliation doesn't mean that anyone has to compromise their beliefs. But they must come together with a willingness to understand and respect each other.

"Reconciliation means that I no longer mistrust the grace of God in my fellow Christians," said Stephen Verney, a retired Anglican bishop and organizer of Reconciliation '97. "It is his table that we come to, not the table of one group or another."

Forgiveness also plays a significant role in reconciliation, said F.W. DeKlerk, former president of South Africa who led the nation to end apartheid. DeKlerk spoke at Coventry Cathedral on Sept. 2 as a part of a lecture series sponsored by Coventry University's Centre for the Study of Peace and Reconciliation.

"Forgiveness builds the road to reconciliation," acknowledged DeKlerk. "The deepest meaning of reconciliation is embedded in our relationship with God. If he forgave us, we should be able to forgive others."

Participants endorsed a conference statement affirming "the diversity and integrity of the traditions from which we came" and thanking God "for the leaders of our churches who strive to direct, promote and influence the work of reconciliation and who thereby proclaim the biblical message of reconciliation."

"As brothers and sisters in Christ, sharing a burden for the gospel, we wish to commend before God, you our leaders, for the work you do and the role you can continue to play as reconcilers and facilitators of reconciliation," the statement said. "We encourage you to renew your efforts, assuring you that as we recommit ourselves to this work, we will support your endeavors by prayerful and practical action, as together we seek to fulfill the will of God for all his people throughout the world."

Southern Baptists were among primary planners for the conference, but few attended after a Home Mission Board trustee this summer protested the agency's involvement in what he described as an "ecumenical" meeting.

William Streich, a layman from Dallas, convinced Home Mission Board trustees to refuse to pay travel expenses for any employee attending the meeting. At the inaugural meeting of the North American Mission Board, a new agency which replaced the HMB in June, Streich sought to forbid any employee from going to the meeting. His motion did not pass, but it succeeded in discouraging any NAMB employees from attending, as well as some workers at other Southern Baptist Convention agencies.

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Religion prime factor distinguishing Christian right and left, study says

By Mark Wingfield

THOUSAND OAKS, Calif. (ABP) -- Profound differences in religious beliefs -- not socio-economic factors -- explain the divergent viewpoints of America's Christian Right and Christian Left, according to a recently published study.

"Both groups take their religious faith seriously; both are highly committed and allow their faith to strongly influence their politics," reports Charles Hall of California Lutheran University. "But their religious convictions lead them in different ideological directions due in part to their differences on how they read the Bible, the nature of salvation, the role of the church and differences in denominational background."

The bottom line, according to Hall: "In order to understand how Christian activists end up with different social and political ideologies, one should pay close attention to differences in their religious orientations."

Hall's research, extracted from a doctoral dissertation, is published in the September issue of the Review of Religious Research, the journal of the Religious Research Association. The article's title is "The Christian Left: Who Are They and How Are They Different from the Christian Right?"

To get at this question, Hall surveyed participants in eight Christian activist groups, four aligned with the Christian Right and four with the Christian Left. The groups studied included Sojourners, Bread for the World, Justlife and Evangelicals for Social Action on the left, and Prison Fellowship, Focus on the Family, Americans for the Republic and Concerned Women for America on the right.

From 460 to 796 adherents of each group responded to Hall's survey, with no one group accounting for more than 17 percent of total respondents.

Demographically speaking, activists with the Christian Right and Christian Left appear strikingly similar, Hall reports. They have similar average incomes (about \$35,000), are of similar average ages (42), are fairly evenly divided among men and women, mostly are college graduates with many holding advanced degrees. The two groups appear similar even in a breakdown of college majors, with the largest single group coming from the humanities, but with significant groups from the social sciences and applied sciences.

Nearly half the participants on each side of religious activism hold jobs in what social researchers have dubbed the "new class," occupations that produce or use knowledge, such as teachers, professors, scientists, journalists, social workers and clergy.

Adherents to the Christian Right and Christian Left also share general opposition to abortion, Hall reports. Only 7 percent of the Christian Left and 9 percent of the Christian Right believe abortions always should be allowed for any reason. The vast majority of both groups believe abortion should be allowed only in rare circumstances such as rape and to save the life of the mother.

But that's where the commonalities end.

The two sides define themselves, Hall suggests, by opposing viewpoints on issues such as women's ordination, equal rights for women, condom distribution in schools, openness to gay rights and support for environmental protection.

On the question of whether women should be allowed to be ordained, 78 percent of the Christian Left said yes while only 21 percent of the Christian Right said yes. Likewise, on the question of whether they support equal rights for women, 61 percent of the Christian Left said yes and 11 percent of the Christian Right said yes.

Members of the Christian Left also are more likely to favor condom distribution in public schools and are more open to homosexual rights, the study found.

Further, a fundamental distinction appears in how members of the two groups view the root causes of society's problems, Hall explains. "The Christian Left is much more likely to blame social and political factors for poverty rather than blaming the individual, and strongly favors the role of government in helping the needy. The Christian Right is more likely to fault the poor for their poverty than to blame structural factors and does not believe government should provide help for the needy."

This explains, Hall says, why the Christian Right is known for activism on individual responsibility issues such as pornography, drinking, abortion and school prayer, while the Christian Left is more associated with system-driven issues such as civil-rights movements, anti-war movements, disarmament, the environment and women's rights.

On a related note, Hall's research also found that activists with the Christian Left are overwhelmingly Democrats (61 percent), while activists with the Christian Right are strongly Republicans (81 percent).

What drives these differences in religious activism in the political arena ultimately, though, is theology more than politics or demographics, Hall asserts.

For example, a majority of adherents of both the Christian Right and Christian Left view the Bible as authoritative. But adherents of the Christian Right are far more likely than the Christian Left to say they read the Bible literally, word for word (54 percent vs. 4 percent).

Also, 98 percent of the Christian Right adherents interviewed by Hall said salvation is found only through Jesus, while 64 percent of respondents from the Christian Left said the same.

Eighty-eight percent of the Christian Right classified themselves as theological conservatives, while 66 percent of the Christian Left labeled themselves theological liberals.

The Christian Right finds its identity predominantly among evangelicals (81 percent), Hall found. The Christian Left comes primarily from mainline Protestant churches (40 percent), but also draws from Roman Catholics (29 percent) and evangelicals (27 percent).

This highlights one other interesting difference between the Christian Right and Christian Left, Hall notes. "While the Christian Left is distinctively different from the Christian Right in their religious orientation, there is much more variation on religious beliefs within the Christian Left than there is within the Christian Right.

"The Christian Left has a significantly large minority of evangelicals (27 percent)," he continues.

"It is possible that this constituency of evangelicals on the left may not see eye-to-eye on all issues with their fellow mainline Protestant and Catholic Left. The greater variation of religious orientation, beliefs and backgrounds suggest that the Christian Left will have a much tougher time than the Christian Right in forming an effective cohesive coalition."

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African-American named to high-level NAMB post

ALPHARETTA, Ga. (ABP) -- An African-American pastor from North Carolina has been named to a high-level position with the new North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Phillip Davis will become the highest-ranking African-American administrator among those named to NAMB positions thus far. As director of new church implementation, he will report directly to Richard Harris, vice president for church planting.

Davis has been pastor of Nations Ford Baptist Church in Charlotte, N.C., since 1988. He founded the multi-ethnic church with 11 members, and it has grown to an average Sunday school attendance of more than 900. Nations Ford also has started two other churches.

In his new role, Davis will be responsible for coordinating and encouraging the starting of new churches across the United States and Canada.

Harris described Davis as "a gifted, visionary leader, and a great pulpiteer with a deep commitment to Christ. He is a proven church planter with a wealth of experience and success in starting new churches."

"My life's vision is to reach people of all races with the gospel of Jesus Christ," Davis said. "I believe this new position will give us the opportunity to do that and train others to do it."

Last November, Davis was elected first vice president of the North Carolina Baptist State Convention in a narrow victory over an incumbent.

Several letter-writers to the Biblical Recorder, North Carolina's state Baptist newspaper, have criticized Davis in recent months -- some for comments he made at the state Evangelism Conference in February and one for the relatively small amount his church has given to the Cooperative Program unified budget.

Marse Grant of Raleigh, N.C., cited state convention statistics to note that Nations Ford Baptist Church has given an average of one-fourth of 1 percent of undesignated receipts to the Cooperative Program over the last five years. The bulk of that money was given in 1996, when the church gave \$5,400 to the Cooperative Program, out of total church receipts of \$990,000.

Several other letter writers criticized comments Davis made at the North Carolina Evangelism Conference this year. According to the Biblical Recorder, Davis said pastors are called to preach, not to lead weddings and funerals or visit people in the hospital.

"I don't go to hospitals unless they're about dead," he said. "They see me coming, they know they're in trouble."

Despite that criticism, Davis had been considered a candidate for state office again this fall. Because of accepting the NAMB position, however, he will complete his current term as first vice president and then move to Georgia.

Others recently named to NAMB positions include:

-- Christopher Schofield, spiritual renewal leadership manager. Schofield has an itinerant preaching and teaching ministry based in Wake Forest, N.C., where he also taught at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary.

-- James "Butch" Henderson, student volunteer mobilization associate. Henderson has served as minister of education at First Baptist Church of Birmingham, Ala., since 1990.

-- Tricia Ragsdale, producer of the television program "Home Life." Ragsdale spent the past seven years as a media producer for the SBC's International Mission Board.

-- Bob Franklin, director of associational strategy. Franklin was director of missions for Noonday Baptist Association in Marietta, Ga., for 12 years.

-- Chuck Allen, director of direct evangelism. Allen has been associate pastor of First Baptist Church of Snellville, Ga.

-- Tom Cheyney, leadership enlistment associate in the church planting group. Cheyney was director of missions for Genesee Baptist Association in Grand Blanc, Mich.

-- Roberto Gama, Hispanic church planting associate. Since 1996, Gama has been on contract assignment with the Home Mission Board writing and teaching the Church Multiplication System.

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-- By ABP staff

Advocacy groups oppose subpoenas issued in campaign finance hearings

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Groups diverse as the American Civil Liberties Union and the Christian Coalition set aside differences Sept. 3 to protest subpoenas ordering at least 27 advocacy groups to submit materials to a Senate panel investigating campaign finance.

Leaders of the nonprofit groups said committee members were on a "fishing expedition," and urged the panel to withdraw what it called "improper and unconstitutional subpoenas."

The ACLU submitted formal objections to the Senate committee on behalf of many of the groups.

"If Congress continues moving in this dangerous direction, the only people who will be allowed to speak about politicians will be politicians, PACs [political action committees] and the press," said Laura Murphy, director of the ACLU's Washington national office.

The ACLU announced its objections at a press conference with groups that represent a broad spectrum of views. The groups included the Association of Trial Lawyers in America, the Christian Coalition, Citizen Action, Citizens Against Government Waste, the International Brotherhood of Teamsters, the National Council for Senior Citizens and the National Right to Life Committee.

The subpoenas are unconstitutional, too broad and exceed the panel's authority, according to leaders of the groups.

A Senate committee source said that the committee would not issue new subpoenas but would work with the nonprofit groups to obtain documents that the panel needs without invading the privacy of the groups. The source said it is possible some leaders of the nonprofit groups may be called to testify before the committee.

James Bopp, general counsel for the National Right to Life Committee, said the NRLC has already submitted documents it deemed to be a "lawful request." He said the groups are prepared to take their objections to court.

Bopp said the investigation was a partisan one with "Democrats investigating what they viewed as 'Republican-leaning groups' and the Republicans investigating 'Democrat-leaning groups.'"

Of all the groups subpoenaed, only seven joined the ACLU at the press conference. Murphy said that most of the other groups are also opposed to the scope of the subpoenas but have chosen to object on their own.

Acting on behalf of the groups, the ACLU objected that the subpoenas exceed the committee's authority, violate the organization's First Amendment rights, are overly broad and burdensome and demand documents that are protected by federal law.

In the joint statement of objections, the groups said they are often each others' opponents on national issues. "But we agree that the Committee's subpoenas are a thinly disguised attack on the right of all private organizations, of whatever viewpoints, to participate actively and effectively in the political life of this nation."

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Congress returns; will address religious persecution, vouchers

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- With a balanced budget deal in place, approving major spending bills is the next major challenge facing the U.S. Congress. But as they resume work, lawmakers are also expected to consider measures to fund religious schools and a bill to curb global religious persecution.

"We should see a new focus on domestic social issues, and conservatives are going to insist that it include religious-freedom issues," predicted Steve McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom.

Among those issues:

-- Debate will resurface over proposals to provide vouchers to low-income parents for tuition at private and parochial schools. Some lawmakers are seeking to attach a voucher plan to the 1998 District of Columbia appropriations bill.

The proposal, offered by Rep. Dick Arney, R-Texas, would give 2,000 students a scholarship of up to \$3,200 for tuition at private schools in the D.C. area.

Several religious-liberty advocates oppose such proposals and say they violate the separation of church and state. Others say such a plan is needed to give students a chance to leave troubled public schools.

-- Another congressional proposal to boost the availability of funds for private and parochial schools would allow parents to place money in a savings account, earning tax-free interest, for primary and secondary school tuition. Sen. Paul Coverdell, R-Ga., sought unsuccessfully to attach the provision to the recent balanced budget.

-- Yet another measure being pushed by the Republican leadership is the American Community Renewal Act. The far-reaching proposal would provide tax benefits to low-income communities, funds for sectarian social services and would require participating "renewal" communities to enact voucher programs.

-- Lawmakers are also expected to move forward with the Workplace Religious Freedom Act, which would require employers to provide greater accommodation for the religious practices of workers in the private sector.

-- House members hope to introduce a bill by the end of the first session to respond to the Supreme Court's ruling that struck down the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, a 1993 law that bolstered protection for religious activity.

-- No further hearings have been scheduled for the constitutional amendment by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., that would allow some forms of school-sponsored prayer and government-endorsed religious speech. It would also allow benefits, such as vouchers, to religious groups just as it would allow benefits to other groups.

McFarland said the Istook measure "is not moving anywhere."

-- One religious liberty measure is set to move swiftly through committees. The Freedom From Religious Persecution Act would create an office of religious-persecution monitoring. The office could impose sanctions against countries engaged in a pattern of religious persecution unless the president waived the sanctions.

The bill is sponsored in the House by Frank Wolf, R-Va., and in the Senate by Arlen Specter, R-Pa. Lawmakers hope to get a vote on the bill in the House by this fall.

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Religious Right threatens public education, group says

By Andrew Black

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Religious Right unjustly criticizes public schools and poses a serious threat to public education, said leaders of People For the American Way, a civil-liberties organization.

At a Sept. 4 press conference, the group released "A Right Wing and a Prayer: The Religious Right and Your Public Schools." The 104-page report focuses on nine areas of recent controversy in the nation's schools.

It claims religious conservatives seek school-sponsored religious activity, the teaching of creationism and public funds for religious schools.

The report also discusses battles over student expression and activities, "parental rights" initiatives, sex education, school reform and control of school boards. Case studies from the previous school year in 26 states are cited in an attempt to document the scope of Religious Right activity.

In Sarasota County, Fla., for instance, a curriculum designed to teach a Bible-history course in public schools was approved. Although using the Bible as a history text in a public school has been ruled unconstitutional, the curriculum was scheduled to be introduced this fall.

Also, the report states, "Even though students are free to express their beliefs and pray in public schools, Religious Right groups have persisted in their efforts to secure passage of a 'religious freedom' constitutional amendment that would allow organized school prayers and other coercive religious activity in public schools."

People for the American Way is noted for its criticism of the Religious Right. Arne Owens, director of communications for the Christian Coalition, called PFAW's new charges "unfortunate."

Owens said a "climate against belief" currently exists in the public school system.

"The bottom line for our supporters is that schools should reinforce rather than undermine the values taught in homes, churches and synagogues," he said. "We also believe that parents ought to have options."

The PFAW report argues that the Religious Right is discrediting the very idea of public education by stirring up controversy and diverting energy away from solving the schools' real problems. As a result, it claims, the debate has now shifted to whether public schools should even exist.

The Religious Right has attempted to spread the message that schools are filled with leaders pursuing an "evil agenda," and play on fears by claiming that "God has been kicked out of the public schools," said senior vice-president Matthew Freeman. Real instances of infringement on the religious rights of students have been "relatively few and far between," he said.

These efforts are part of an overall movement to fundamentally alter education through a voucher system, charged Deanne Duby, the group's director of education policy.

As the rhetoric concerning vouchers and "school choice" proposals continues to increase, voucher opponents must do a much better job educating the voters about "what vouchers really mean," said Duby.

"The right comes up with wonderful sounding ideas such as school choice and parent's rights," she said. "Education about these initiatives quickly slows support for them."

PFAW President Carole Shields attacked voucher supporters for offering unrealistic hope to many who need real educational opportunities.

"It's a dirty trick," Shields said, adding that it was "disingenuous" to promise better schools to needy students when the scholarships would only benefit a few.

Specifically mentioned was the Christian Coalition's "Samaritan Project," which calls for "hope and opportunity scholarships" for disadvantaged urban students.

The Christian Coalition's Owens responded to the criticism by saying that the scholarships were intended "to provide parents in inner cities with the same opportunity that the President and Mrs. Clinton had."

"It at least gives them an option -- which they don't have now," he said.

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Shoeshine lady in right spot for witnessing to rich, famous

By Joyce Sweeney Martin

BOSTON (ABP) -- Sylvia Hill has been an employment counselor, a vocational rehabilitation counselor, a real estate development manager, a social worker and a director of human resources. But these days, she shines shoes.

Hill owns and operates "Sylvia Inc.," a shoeshine stand in Boston's Logan Airport.

The vocation requires 13-hour days -- and many explanations to her professional friends who wonder why a woman who holds a master's degree from Northeastern University in Boston wants to shine shoes.

"My friends and my mother are appalled," she admitted. "My job doesn't engender much respect. No intellectual giant or college graduate, no prideful or self-respecting person wants to be a shoeshine person."

In fact, Hill says her friends often want to fix her up with opportunities to do something else. Just last month, she was offered an interview for a position with a \$70,000 annual salary, but she declined.

Shining shoes fits her perfectly, Hill said.

"What most of my friends don't realize is that for me, shining shoes is a ministry," Hill said. "Everyone knows I love my job."

She didn't always feel that way.

When Hill became a Christian in 1969, she thought that in order to serve Christ she needed to work for a decidedly "Christian" business. She tried that, but quickly discovered she didn't need to change professions to "do more for Christ."

As she watched her late husband, Donald, witness for Christ as an airport shoe shine person, she began to see the impact he had on people's lives as he shared the gospel in ordinary conversation at an ordinary job.

His boss never tried to control what Mr. Hill said, but eventually did stop him from listening to Christian radio and tapes on the job. So after 13 years, Mr. Hill opened his own stand in 1985 so he'd have the freedom to talk about Christ, Hill said.

He prayed for people who had sickness in their family, or were sick themselves.

He challenged people involved in cults. He read extensively about religious cults and sought opportunities to witness to people involved. He invited them to go with him to their church, Boston's Twelfth Baptist Church, Hill said.

Since "ordinary people don't usually have their shoes shined," Mr. Hill had many occasions to establish relationships with prominent people, Hill said.

Mr. Hill and a well-known Boston rabbi developed a "very good relationship," in spite of Mr. Hill's challenges to the rabbi's beliefs about Jesus. After Mr. Hill's death in 1995, the rabbi, who now lives in New York, came by the stand to tell Hill how much he enjoyed those talks. "He cried when he learned about Don's death," Hill said.

And television sports commentator and Boston Globe sportswriter Bud Collins has been a long-time customer. He mentioned both Hills in a column after Mr. Hill's death.

Since many customers were regulars, they often returned to thank Mr. Hill for his prayers, she said. About it all, "Don would say, 'just planting seed.'"

Mr. Hill's enthusiasm for his ministry rubbed off on his wife. "I began to see how God was using the stand for his glory," she said.

For seven years Hill put in a full day at her professional job, then headed to Logan Airport to work a four-hour evening shift at the shoeshine stand. Mr. Hill opened the stand each morning at 5 a.m. and worked until she arrived.

Then, after a few years of not working at the stand at all, Hill returned full-time in May 1995, after Mr. Hill developed cancer. He died Dec. 14, 1995.

It's a decision she said she has never regretted.

Hill has had plenty of opportunities to follow her husband's example and offer more than just a spiffy polish. People pour out their hearts to shoeshiners, like they do for bartenders and hairdressers, she said.

"They tell me very personal things," Hill said. "And often I take time to pray with them. Or I'll tell them I'll pray for them later."

Most often all she has to ask is how a person is doing and immediately the floodgates open.

"People see me as a non-person. I'm certainly non-threatening, and in some cases, they feel they'll never see me again, so they really open their hearts," she said.

They talk about marital problems, financial problems, problems with their children or their business. They may be nervous about an upcoming job interview or on their way to see a sick relative.

"I tell them I can't solve them, but I can point them to the one who can," Hill said. "There is a name greater than illness, greater than marital strife, greater than financial problems. There is a name above every name, and a name that is greater than those problems."

Recently, a nationally-known Harvard University professor came by the stand and asked Hill to pray for him and said he would be praying for her. She had first prayed for him a year ago.

About a year ago, another man told her he had bone cancer and didn't expect to live long. He recently returned to tell her the prayers had helped: he is still alive.

While no child growing up aspires to be a shoeshine person, Hill says she is honored to have the job.

"God has placed me at the crossroads of life and has used me to show forth the love of Christ," she said. "When I think that Jesus himself washed the disciples' feet, I'm proud that God has entrusted me with the responsibility of shining people's shoes."

After all, Hill says "being a Christian and living out your faith is what you do no matter what position you have."

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Connecticut pastor unafraid to take risks for the gospel

By Pat Cole

HARTFORD, Conn. (ABP) -- James Bishop knows what it's like to take risks for the sake of the gospel.

Bishop, pastor of Welcome Baptist Church in Hartford, Conn., has seen drug deals made outside his church. Just a few blocks away, a public housing project was the scene of more than 50 murders in late 1995 and early 1996.

Yet Bishop and his congregation were not scared away by the violence and drug activity. Instead, they responded with an evangelistic effort inside the housing project and help for people struggling with drug addiction.

Hartford police officers became concerned when they heard about the church's intention to witness at the housing project. Fearing for the safety of the church members, police offered to drive through and sound their sirens before church members entered the area.

The police presence sent the drug dealers into hiding and gave the people from Welcome a chance to distribute English and Spanish Bibles. They continued that ministry for about a year.

"People knew our church and knew we were there to help," Bishop said. The housing project recently has been demolished, and the violence in the community has subsided. A newly-renovated apartment building across the street from the church, a new sanctuary for Welcome and other construction projects stand as evidence that new life is springing forth in the neighborhood.

Meanwhile, Bishop and his church continue an aggressive outreach into the community.

As a savvy urban pastor, Bishop knows how to read the signs of drug territory. He can spot the sneakers flung across utility wires and the telling graffiti painted on walls.

Yet Bishop is convinced the gospel can rescue people from any circumstance, even on street corners where the drug culture rules.

Since coming to the church in 1988, Bishop has implemented a strong program of Bible teaching and discipleship training. He's seen lives transformed. "They say 'the word of God has changed my life,'" Bishop said. "They've been in every program in town and nothing else worked."

The church provides a "healing ministry" for people who are "addicted to anything whether it be alcohol, drugs or food," Bishop said. The healing ministry is also a refuge for victims of physical or sexual abuse.

The ministry meets on Thursday evenings and gives people an opportunity to share their struggles freely. Bishop said the ministry combines the 12-step program for addiction with biblical teachings.

"When people get under pressure and nobody listens to them, that's when they turn to drugs," Bishop said. "That's when the drug dealer will be smiling."

Bishop, a man not given to the slightest hint of braggadocio, shows a small grin as he peers over plans for the new sanctuary under construction. It will accommodate 600 worshippers, and the sanctuary and other related capital projects will cost \$800,000.

The old sanctuary will be used as educational space and several nearby houses have been purchased by the church and will be rehabilitated. Some units will be rented to church members and others will house homeless people.

Bishop attributes the growth of the church to its commitment to the Bible. Since Bishop came to the church, it has grown from a membership of 225 to 700. "We keep the word at the center of our ministry."

Meanwhile, the congregation is catching the eye of people at city hall. At a recent ground breaking service for the new sanctuary, Hartford Mayor Mike Peters promised that the city would give the congregation an abandoned apartment building near the church to renovate.

"They're very interested in doing something with the neighborhood, now that the new church building is coming," Bishop said.

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