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In this issue:

- **Race relations: Central High School integration maintains historic impact**
- **Arizona Baptist paper closes; will be replaced by magazine**
- **'Women of Faith' rally offers 'joyful' conference experience**

Race relations: Central High School integration maintains historic impact

By Trennis Henderson

LITTLE ROCK, Ark. (ABP) -- The historic scene is etched in the minds of many Americans: federal troops escorting nine black students up the steps of Central High School in Little Rock on Sept. 25, 1957. Forty years later, President Bill Clinton, Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee and other dignitaries will gather at Central High to commemorate the court-ordered integration which remains a benchmark in the nation's civil-rights movement.

Beyond the celebration marking the event's 40th anniversary and numerous other public gatherings throughout the week, what lasting progress has been made in racial reconciliation efforts over the past four decades?

According to Ernest Green, one of the former students who became known collectively as "The Little Rock Nine," the civil-rights movement "expanded opportunities for whites as well as blacks." Affirming that "the region is better off," he acknowledged that "there are still large pockets of people who have not benefited from it."

Green, a former assistant secretary of labor during the Carter administration, is now managing director of an investment banking firm in Washington, D.C., and a member of the national board of the NAACP. Declaring "the task of the future" is to expand assistance to poor, under-educated individuals and families, he said he hopes the current focus on race relations will help "impact young people today."

Green was the first black student to graduate from Central High, going on to earn a graduate degree at Michigan State University. Recalling the tension generated in Little Rock in 1957, Green noted: "We were all surprised by the force of the opposition. It took over three weeks to finally gain entrance into the school."

Citing "the support from President Eisenhower," who federalized the state's National Guard to protect the black students, Green said his graduation the following May "was a sense of accomplishment and a feeling of vindication -- being able to achieve a goal you set for yourself."

"Those vehemently opposed to our being at Central at first boycotted school," he recalled. Once those students returned to school, "they really controlled the attitude," he added. "White students who tried to befriend us were ostracized -- it was a reign of terror."

Amid those experiences, Green said, he learned "the ability to follow your convictions, the ability to complete a task and the satisfaction of widening opportunities for myself and my family by participating as one of the nine."

Voicing satisfaction over the opportunity to "play a small role in the civil-rights movement," Green noted, "We all have been pleasantly surprised that Central High has stood as the central story of integration."

Gov. Huckabee, whose daughter, Sarah, is a sophomore this year at Central High, emphasized that "it's a whole different world she is living in than she would have 40 years ago."

Although "no one would say we're everywhere we need to be," Huckabee affirmed that Central High remains a fully integrated school that's providing his daughter and other students "an excellent education."

"Sadly, the events of 40 years ago had a major impact on what people thought of Little Rock and Arkansas," the governor remarked. He described the clash over integration as "a real stain on our state's otherwise noble history."

"We can try to ignore it or we can confront it in such a way that we grow from it and show people that those old attitudes and prejudices can die," Huckabee said. "It has been a miserable failure to try to sweep it under the rug."

Emphasizing the need to "confront the ghosts of our past," he declared: "Many government and church leaders in 1957 took the wrong position. Now government and church leaders have the opportunity to take the right position."

Huckabee, a former president of the Arkansas Baptist State Convention, called on church and government leaders to "openly and unapologetically declare that what happened in the past with bigotry was morally wrong." Noting that "racism was not only ignored but fostered from the pulpit," he added, "The right thing to do is stand for true justice and true reconciliation."

Huckabee's views echo a resolution on racial reconciliation adopted in 1995 by the Southern Baptist Convention. Acknowledging that "Southern Baptists failed, in many cases, to support, and in some cases opposed, legitimate initiatives to secure the civil rights of African-Americans," the resolution urged Southern Baptists to "unwaveringly denounce racism, in all its forms, as deplorable sin" and to "commit ourselves to eradicate racism in all its forms from Southern Baptist life and ministry."

One example of progress in Arkansas Baptist life was the election last December of Eddie Jones Sr., as the state convention's first black church planter strategist.

Calling historic struggles to integrate society "worth every effort," Jones said, "The challenges then and today are to bring us closer together and remind us we are still not there." He said the SBC's 1995 action is an indication that "there's nothing standing between those who are true Christians forgiving and going forward....The spirit of it has lifted any wedge or obstacle."

"I think we are beginning to try to listen to each other for the first time and trying to understand each other," he affirmed. "Those of us trying to reach people for Jesus and encourage racial harmony are going forward."

"We need the black and white piano keys to make beautiful music," Jones reflected. "We need the night and the day."

-30-

Arizona Baptist paper closes; will be replaced by magazine

PHOENIX (ABP) -- The Baptist Beacon, Arizona Baptists' 65-year-old newspaper, published its final issue Aug. 28.

The biweekly newspaper will be replaced by a monthly magazine focusing on inspirational stories about Southern Baptists in Arizona. The first issue of "Portraits" is scheduled for November.

The Arizona Southern Baptist Convention executive board voted in May to discontinue publishing the Beacon and create the replacement publication following a study by a consultant.

Portraits' purpose will be "to tell the story of how Jesus Christ is working in the lives of Arizona Southern Baptists," explained editor Elizabeth Young in an editorial. Young has been editor of the Baptist Beacon since 1989 and will continue as editor of the new magazine.

The magazine will focus on individuals, churches, associations and agencies of the state convention. National and international stories will be carried "only as they relate to Arizona," according to another article in the paper.

"For example, the first Portraits issue will feature a foreign missionary from Arizona," the article explained. "Within that story, it will be explained that Arizona Southern Baptists support his work by giving through the Cooperative Program [the Southern Baptist Convention's unified budget] and giving to the Lottie Moon Christmas Offering for Foreign Missions."

The final issue of the Beacon suggested several sources for readers interested in national and international news about Southern Baptists, including Baptist Press and SBC agency sites on the Internet and publications available from the SBC Executive Committee, International Mission Board and Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission.

The new magazine will be sent free-of-charge to the homes of Arizona Southern Baptists. Subscriptions for out-of-state readers are \$10 a year.

The Baptist Beacon costs \$7 a year. It is one of 39 newspapers published by state and regional conventions affiliated with the Southern Baptist Convention.

There are an estimated 130,000 Southern Baptists in Arizona. Currently, fewer than 8,000 subscribe to the Baptist state paper.

The Baptist Beacon's circulation peaked at 13,300 in 1981. Since then, however, rising costs in printing and mailing the paper have forced several increases in subscription rates. As the paper's cost went up, circulation went down.

The decision to cancel the paper was based on a study last year by Craig Communications of Nashville, Tenn., recommending that the executive board "consider recasting the Arizona Baptist Beacon or creating a replacement publication to serve the churches and boards."

Funding for the new magazine will come from "a variety of sources," the paper said, including the Arizona Baptist executive board, advertising and donors.

As editor, Young will lead an advisory team composed of members from the executive board and each of the state convention's five agencies. The team will discuss philosophy, operations and budget, plan issues and contribute writing and design skills, she said.

-30-

-- By ABP staff

'Women of Faith' rally offers 'joyful' conference experience

By David Finnigan

ANAHEIM, Calif. (ABP) -- Christian women are getting more choices this year in the types of spiritual conferences and stadium events designed just for them.

For many Christian men, the standard-bearer stadium event remains Promise Keepers, whose organizers expect a multitude to show up in Washington, D.C. for the Oct. 4 "Stand In The Gap" rally.

Women not interested in Promise Keepers-specific, women-only events went to last May's debut "Chosen Women" stadium event in Pasadena, Calif., which attracted more than 17,000 people.

More recently, Southern California saw another all-women, all-Christian event at the Sept. 12-13 "Women of Faith Joyful Journey Conference" in a huge hockey arena in Anaheim.

Tears, prayers, songs and chuckles set the tone.

"Chosen Women' seemed like a heavier event, kind of more serious and heavy and deep," said Leslee Marvin, 29, a mom and software quality engineer who attends Orangewood Avenue Baptist Church in Garden Grove. While she knew that many Christian women got a lot out of Chosen Women, she said she chose a Women of Faith weekend because, "I knew it would be light and encouraging and enjoyable. That's where I'm at in my spiritual life."

Whereas Promise Keepers is partly about repentance and stronger fidelity to the wife and kids, Women of Faith's mandate is to make the audience both laugh and cry.

"Our main objective ... is to give women permission to laugh," said Thelma Wells, 56, a Dallas businesswoman and one of seven speakers on the conference's 14-city 1997 tour. "It was intended for women to laugh. Women don't laugh enough. Some women are even afraid to laugh so much. They're afraid to let loose."

Let loose is exactly what Christian humorist Luci Swindoll (Chuck Swindoll's sister -- not wife -- she tells inquiring minds) did in her speech closing out the two-day event. Swindoll talked about the joys of growing older. "I love being 65, because of its alternative, which is death." She passed on three simple rules to an attentive crowd -- savor the moment, take risks, and be intentionally involved in life.

"I think it's all about the question of your walk with Christ and the quest for discipleship," said Stacey Miller, 34, a mother of three boys. A speech pathologist, she came to the conference with more than two dozen other women from their Conservative Baptist church in Mission Viejo, Calif. "How are you pursuing your walk with the Lord? And to what level are you willing to take risks and get involved?"

Women appreciated the conference's tone -- light but reverent; acknowledging God's power and human frailty. Conference organizers expect a 1997 total of 150,000 women nationwide and are planning a 26-city tour in 1998.

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