

Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Greg Warner
Associate Editor: Bob Allen
Phone: (904) 262-6626
Fax: (904) 262-7745

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Birmingham minister murdered on way to Promise Keepers rally

By Johnie Sentell

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Centercrest Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala., held a "service of love" Oct. 6 for Brian Tribble, the church's 36-year-old assistant pastor who was shot to death on his way to a Promise Keepers rally in Washington early Oct. 3.

Tribble, assistant pastor for music and education for seven years, was shot, apparently by a burglar, after he arrived at the church sometime after 1 a.m. He was preparing to leave with a group of men from the church to take part in the Promise Keepers' "Stand in the Gap" rally on the Washington Mall.

Other men arriving at the church discovered his body at about 1:30 a.m. News of his death spread nationwide through media coverage of the Promise Keepers rally.

Grieving church members at the suburban church jotted their thoughts on "Dear Brian, I'll never forget ..." cards passed out in Sunday school.

One card read, "I'll never forget the glow of God shining through your face whenever you were singing." Another writer recalled "the awesome times that we spent in the prisons ministering to the inmates." Another member recalled "the love you showed for everyone and our own Lord and Savior; I remember you talking about Heaven and saying (with tears in your eyes) 'I just can't wait!'"

Bob Curlee, who has served as pastor at Centercrest for 25 years, said, "Brian Tribble was an angel without a halo, a preacher without proper credentials, a music director who couldn't read music, a worker with youth who never grew up."

"Yet when he sang, the heavenly choirs paused to listen. When he finished a song, there was the applause of men and the rustling of angel wings. He grew up singing in nightclubs and starred at Opryland, but when he turned his talents over to the Lord, hundreds, yea thousands, were blessed."

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Curlee said when he was called about Tribble's death "my heart broke as did every man, woman, youth, child of our church.

"But we are thankful that we have a God who is the Promise Keeper, and we are sustained by knowing that he is in Paradise with our Lord and by the comforting presence of his Holy Spirit and the hugs and love we receive from all other members of our church and hundreds of churches and pastors who reached to us," Curlee said.

Stacy Reed, minister to youth at Centercrest and a longtime friend of Tribble, said he was first overcome by the senselessness of Tribble's violent death. However, he said he was able to understand later that God could bring good out of such a terrible situation.

He noted that if Tribble had died in an automobile accident or died on another day, his life and his love for God would have not been made known to such a large number of people. "We have heard from thousands and thousands of people across the country," Reed said.

Reed said he and Tribble had been talking about death only a couple of weeks earlier. He said Tribble had hoped that his death would be sudden, not lingering, but he had wondered what would happen to his wife and children.

Reed noted that Tribble said funerals should be times of celebration.

"He didn't want to be thought of as a saint. He was very human. But his 'flaws' were what endeared him to everybody," Reed said. "He was a big kid. The child in him appealed to the child in everybody."

Reed said, "As a result of Brian's death, the rest of us will have to pick up the slack."

He noted that Tribble's influence was also felt at United Airlines, where he worked as a ticket clerk on a late shift, and at Erwin High School, his alma mater, where he was announcer at the football games.

In lieu of flowers, the family had suggested that memorials be made to Centercrest Baptist Church. However, dozens of floral arrangements lined the walls of the worship center at Centercrest for the memorial service. One heart-shaped arrangement reminded those attending about Tribble's special appreciation for Promise Keepers. The red, white and blue arrangement was placed immediately behind the casket. On it were written two large letters, "PK."

Survivors include Tribble's wife, Roxanne Bailey Tribble of Clay, Ala.; three daughters: Katelyn Tribble, 7, McKinley Tribble, 3, and Bailey Tribble, 6 months; and a son, Jake Scott Tribble, 2. A trust fund has been set up for the children at SouthTrust Bank in Center Point.

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Gregory says he regrets role in SBC takeover

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Seven years later, fallen insider Joel Gregory says he now regrets his efforts to help a conservative faction gain charge of the Southern Baptist Convention.

Gregory, 49, told a conference in Birmingham, Ala., that he reluctantly entered the fray and only because leaders of the conservative faction pledged to "broaden the tent" of denominational leadership.

But conservative leaders did not keep that promise, Gregory told ministers at an Oct. 6-7 "Leadership with Integrity" conference sponsored by the Nashville, Tenn.,-based Baptist Center for Ethics.

The bigger tent "obviously was an illusion," Gregory said during a dialogue session at the conference held at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church. "And I wish I had been out of the tent."

Gregory told of being pressured by both sides as moderates and conservatives battled for control of the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group during the 1980s.

"With visibility in Southern Baptist life in the '80s came an increasing pressure to do something," Gregory said.

Gregory said a few prominent conservative ministers endured criticism for resisting that pressure.

"There were those of us who felt like Southern Baptists would be best served if every last person was not completely camped up," Gregory said. "There were others who felt like this was cowardice, it was abandoning the ship. If you were not with us, you were against us."

During a key presidential election in 1990, Gregory said he sided with conservatives based on "a promise that there was going to be a broader coalition, the tent was going to be enlarged."

Gregory said he and fellow pastors including John Bisagno, Ken Hemphill and Charles Fuller "thought that was going to be the agenda."

"Obviously that didn't happen," Gregory said. "That was regrettable. I don't mind saying at all I have little taste for any of it. It's not my inclination. It's not my gift."

"I look back on that now from the distance of five years being totally out of it, looking at the larger issues churches face, human beings face, the isolation of my own life, I really do feel a lot of us were like Don Quixote tilting at windmills amid the larger issues of our day."

Even at First Baptist Church of Dallas, generally regarded as the "epicenter" of Baptist conservatism, the controversy was rarely an issue, Gregory said. "It wasn't mentioned in the pulpit. It wasn't discussed in the Sunday school rooms."

Gregory said even the conservative movement's patriarch, W.A. Criswell, confided to him: "Ah, lad, no, no, I keep that out of the church."

"Which I think is a very telling observation that what that whole thing did inside congregations wasn't necessarily a good outcome," he said.

"I wish I had never touched it, regardless of whether I'd been identified as a life-long fence sitter," he said.

In response to a question about whether he would ever again preach regularly, Gregory confessed, "I don't know what to do about that."

After Gregory's shocking resignation from First Baptist Church in Dallas in 1992, he said he received a few invitations to preach. Those gradually fell off and ceased completely after he wrote "Too Great a Temptation," a book chronicling his rise and fall at Dallas First, in 1994.

Gregory, who now works for a publishing company, acknowledged "more recently, either by curiosity or providence, I am being asked to preach." He said he is accepting, but not seeking, such opportunities.

"I am having an increasing number of invitations to speak," Gregory said. "I have made the decision I will not lift a finger to open a door to find a place to speak. If in the providence of God those doors open ... then I have come through those doors."

"I think I may help people in the pews more with my preaching now than I did at some other times," Gregory said. "That is very much a pilgrimage."

On another topic, Gregory called for preachers to develop alternatives to "the corporate model" of leadership that is dominant in evangelical churches. Churches are treated as "a corporate ecclesiastical structure" and "you are the CEO/pastor," he said.

Rejecting that model "doesn't mean the ministry needs to be without goals," he said. "It doesn't mean the ministry needs to cease to be strenuous. But to say ministry has goals or it is strenuous ... you can say all that without having to evaluate that life-sacrifice in terms of numbers."

He suggested validating ministry based on person-to-person contacts rather than in "the anonymity of masses."

"I think any redefinition of success is going to have to come back to what used to be the definition of ministers, of pastors -- the curer of souls."

Gregory said he believes the most visible manifestation of corporate Christianity, the mega-church, will not last.

"I have a feeling that the super church phenomenon is part of contemporary American culture and will not last. And that's not to pronounce doom on it. I'm not the one to do that. It's not to say people are not helped by that because I frankly know people who are."

"You can't damn them and say they are all bad, but I do think ... they are a measure of American cultural success. If you take the sweep of church history, they are anomalies."

For most of history, Gregory said, the "parish church" has been the dominant expression of Christianity and the "faithful pastor with a flock" the primary ministerial model.

Gregory said the first test of whether mega-churches will survive will come when current pastors step aside.

"There has yet to be a really successful succession in a super church," he said. Most are led by a "patriarch/visionary" founder or someone who "reinvents" a vision for an existing church.

"A lot of these men, if they hadn't been in religion, would have been senators, would have been in government, they would have been CEOs of major companies. Here you have these fabulously gifted individuals who are patriarchs and visionaries of these huge institutions. Who's going to follow them? I know that [challenge] from the inside. I was just a fair country preacher. It ate me up."

"If you've got a problem of succession, you've got a problem of existence in those churches," Gregory said. "It hasn't happened yet successfully."

Gregory also talked of disappointment over being shunned by friends when he left the ministry while being surprised by support from unlikely sources.

"Some people for whom I ecclesiastically opened my veins and bled to enfranchise them, for them I became nonexistent," Gregory said. "Now don't interpret that as a right-left thing. It's not left and right in Baptist life. It's all over the map."

"There were people who I thought either didn't know me, or if they did know me probably despise me, have found ways to embrace me in ways even to their own loss. There were people I thought would run to my side for whom I seemed to cease to exist."

Gregory said he found support from unexpected places, including non-Baptist ministers, Baptists from across the country and high-school classmates he had not heard from for years. Some friends "assiduously hunted me down" at a time when he would have preferred to be left alone. "There were some people who knew what I needed better than I did," he said. "That was a gift of the grace of God."

"Out of that experience of abandonment by some and being embraced, the surprise has really been on the upside rather than the downside," Gregory said.

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Former mega-church pastor offers insights for ministers

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Five years after getting off the "treadmill of ambition, gift and providence" that won him the coveted pastorate of First Baptist Church in Dallas, Joel Gregory offered observations "from the peanut gallery of Baptist life" at a conference in Birmingham, Ala.

Gregory, who documented his rise to one of America's most prestigious pulpits and his abrupt resignation in his 1994 book, "Too Great a Temptation," spoke at an Oct. 6-7 Leadership with Integrity conference at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church.

The meeting was sponsored by the 6-year-old Baptist Center for Ethics, a Nashville, Tenn.,-based network of clergy and educators providing resources on ethical and social issues for moderate Baptist churches.

Once among the most visible preachers in the Southern Baptist Convention, it was Gregory's first conference since he shocked observers by leaving the Dallas church after two years in 1992 when his predecessor, the legendary W. A. Criswell, refused to retire.

"I am profoundly grateful to be here," Gregory said. "I have not addressed a gathering of any clergy the last five years. Before that, Baptists could hardly have a barn-raising without me being present."

Gregory shared perspectives on the ministry gained by his ride "up the ecclesiastical escalator" and the "something of a free fall" that followed. After leaving Dallas First, Gregory worked as a door-to-door salesman for pre-planned funerals. Now he works for a publishing firm and preaches only occasionally.

He offered ministers the following insights:

-- "I have learned, let success happen by providence and by gift. Don't try to force it."

Gregory said he would have "enjoyed all the success I wanted, needed or deserved" if he had been satisfied with his strengths of biblical interpretation and preaching.

"Let the success that God gives you be what flows from his providence and from his gifts. If you do not, you can get upside down, as I often did in ministry."

-- Avoid the "encore syndrome." Gregory borrowed the term from the pressure in business "that every year has to be better than the previous year" and applied it to the ministry. While climbing the ladder to mega-church fame, Gregory said he "lived with a crushing pressure of achievement" and was "addicted to always having to preach a little better the next sermon, the next conference."

-- "Subordinate quantification to everything else in your ministry."

Gregory noted that Jesus Christ said little about numbers. "Buildings, budgets and baptisms," Gregory mused. "As I look back on it now, my own life, it is sad to say, that was as much an act of unfaith as it was an act of faith."

"If faith has to do with the substance and evidence of things that are unseen and future, why is it then we have to get our validation from the things that are present and visible?" he queried. "Quantification was not the end of faith for Jesus."

"I subordinated my best gifts to the drive for quantification and because of that did not enjoy the journey as much as I would have enjoyed it," Gregory said.

-- "Assume the success of the Kingdom, but do not take any local church with ultimate seriousness."

Gregory warned against the tendency to "absolutize" the local church so that its success or failure is equated with success or failure of God's plan.

"I would have done better if I had believed some of my own preaching about the Kingdom of God," Gregory said. "Jesus gave it to us; we do not have to build it."

-- "Succeed with individuals and not with masses."

Gregory said reflecting on the breadth of his ministry, his most satisfying memory is, as a student at Baylor serving as pastor of "slum church" in Waco, sharing the gospel message one-on-one to an African-American child.

"I look back on ministry to masses and individuals and I would say, 'Succeed with people and not the masses of people and in the providence of God the Kingdom will take care of itself,'" Gregory said.

Later, in a smaller dialogue session, Gregory contrasted that quiet encounter to one of the most visible moments of his career, when he preached the Southern Baptist Convention sermon in 1988 in San Antonio.

When it was over, "I remember leaving that platform tired, just tired, just tired. I didn't feel great. Didn't feel down. I just felt worn out. But in terms of feeling like this is a great act of ministry, it didn't feel that way. I felt that way with individuals."

Sense of worth helps leaders overcome desire to dominate, priest tells Baptists

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- To be effective leaders, ministers must overcome the desire to dominate others, a longtime Baptist pastor turned Episcopal priest told a conference on leadership ethics in Birmingham, Ala.

John Claypool, rector of Birmingham's St. Luke's Episcopal Church, said the urge both to dominate and to be dominated is part of human nature, but Jesus rejected that model in relating to his followers.

In the gospel, Jesus told his disciples "this is the way the pagans choose to relate to each other ... but it's not to be that way with you," Claypool said at an Oct. 6-7 "Leadership with Integrity" conference sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics.

"Jesus poses another definition of leadership that is incredibly more authentic, but it is still rare in our fallen human culture -- being a servant," Claypool said.

"The one who is willing to be a servant ... learns about the person he or she is working with," Claypool said. "Leadership, growing out of being a servant, becomes a gift-giving kind of enterprise and not a domination," he said.

Ironically, Claypool said, the leader is unable to give the gift of servanthood unless he or she possesses a sense of worth.

Claypool described "memories of profound inadequacy" from childhood that he channeled into a competitive drive to always be number one. "I was using every situation to try to enhance that sagging sense of self," he said.

Claypool said he found liberation when a fellow minister confessed before a group, "What you and I need more than anything else is to hear the gospel of Jesus Christ down in our guts."

Those words, Claypool said, prompted him to recall Jesus' words in the gospel, "You are the light of the world."

"Something like fire moved from the top of my head to the bottom of my heart," Claypool said. "I had a worth that had been placed in me by God and did not have to be earned."

"I had been given the gift of worth as surely as the gift of birth."

"The great genius of the Christian life is what is inside and being willing to give that away as a gift," Claypool said, "the secret of letting our ministers become gifts that we give to others rather than try to buy other people's approval by what we do."

Through that realization, "we get this energy to become servants," he said.

"I guess what I'm saying is an experience of grace is absolutely basic to a ministry of gift-giving," Claypool said. "Until it comes to us by the ministry of the Holy Spirit that we are what we are by the grace of God ... that we already amount to something because of what God has given us beginning with the grace of birth ... then we'll have this terrible need to be a person who is always trying to be something."

With "'being' issues already settled by the grace of God," however, ministers are free "to give ourselves as servants and gift givers," he said.

"I'm talking to you today about a counterculture style of leadership that I think in the long run is more effective," Claypool said.

"Jesus related up and not down to people."

Established in 1991, the Nashville, Tenn.-based Baptist Center for Ethics is an independent network of clergy and educators providing resources on ethical and social issues for moderate Baptists.

Claypool was a Baptist minister for 30 years before becoming an Episcopal priest in 1985. "I was being a quintessential Baptist when I chose to make this move," he said, alluding to the Baptist distinctive often called the priesthood of believers. "It was exactly out of that living out of my own sense of truth that led me to move from one room of God's house to another."

Claypool said he is grateful for his Baptist heritage and that the conference reminded him of gatherings the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission sponsored "in its first incarnation" in the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, before it was taken over by conservatives.

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Author calls for redefined church for post-modern world

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- The church has become "useless" in a world that is no longer interested in its world view, morality or witness, an author told a Baptist conference Oct. 6-7 in Birmingham, Ala.

In two speeches at the Baptist Center for Ethics "Leadership with Integrity" conference at Vestavia Hills Baptist Church, editor and author Rodney Clapp called for a radical redefining of church and Christianity for a postmodern world.

Modern Christians have responded to the "waning days of Christendom" by two extremes, said Clapp, senior editor for InterVarsity Press and author of "A Peculiar People: The Church as Culture in a Post-Christian Society."

One is people who seek "sentimental associations" to religious traditions that no longer hold meaning for them, said Clapp, an Episcopalian who grew up in a rural United Methodist Church.

That tendency shows up "when pastors are reduced to cut-rate therapists, ... to religious managers or entertainers," he said.

Another reaction is "retrenchment," or trying to restore Christians to power in society. He cited Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney's pledge to "take this nation for Jesus," as an example.

The two groups have more in common than they imagine, Clapp said. In order to translate their message to appeal to a broader population, the "retrenchers very often must drop Christian distinctives."

American culture has evolved from primarily Protestant in the 17th and 18th century, to a broader Christianity following waves of immigration in the 19th century and more recently to a Judeo-Christian and then "Deist" perspective, he said.

Polls say the fastest-growing population segment is those who profess to be "seculars."

In that context, "unless the retrenchers resort to draconian and coercive measures, ... they must really dilute their Christian faith to appeal to a whole nation," Clapp said.

Liberal Episcopalian Bishop John Spong and Religious Right leader Pat Robertson are really "twins, separated at birth," Clapp quipped.

Both are heirs to a "Constantinian" view of Christianity, Clapp said, which resulted in a "blurring of the church and the world."

Christianity was "largely a slave religion" before the Roman emperor Constantine made it legal in 312, Clapp said. After Christianity became Rome's state religion in 380, the gauge of Christian ethics moved from individual convictions to behaviors that upheld society.

In the modern era, the "Constantinian church" has downplayed its emphasis on Jesus and the heritage of Israel, Clapp said. "As time wore on, atheists and agnostics have strangely found Christians less interesting, because we are trying to tell them what they already know," he said.

It has also focused on "privatized faith" that is a distortion of biblical Christianity, Clapp said. He used an analogy of the conference crowd "sitting, wearing deep-sea diving suits with individual hoses going up to Heaven."

"The modern arrangement has pushed us toward this sort of privatization," he said, quoting former President Dwight Eisenhower as saying, "America needs a religion, and I don't care what it is."

The modern church was also characterized by greater allegiance to nation-states than to religion, he said -- noting that German and American Lutherans fought on opposite sides in World War II -- and by a tendency to support the secular status quo.

Rather than sentimental attachment or retrenchment, Clapp called for viewing "the church itself as a Christian culture."

"I think our best hope is not with Evangelicalism, mainline Protestantism, Roman Catholicism or even the Southern Baptist Convention," Clapp said.

Instead, Clapp advocated rediscovery of a "radical evangelical and catholic Christianity."

Clapp said such an "evangelical" church would place greater value on "our new life in Christ" than on distinctions of race, gender, politics or sexual orientation. The "catholic" nature, meanwhile, would acknowledge "the centrality of the church ... as the living body of Christ."

To accomplish such a view, he challenged ministers to "be Christians" by:

-- Establishing new models of religious authority.

"Christians are too often oriented as religious consumers," Clapp said, "not so much worshippers as church shoppers."

"We need a way of reclaiming a Christian authority that is not authoritarianism."

Authority "will be a major issue within the church," Clapp predicted. But top-down management that worked in former days will not work, he said.

Ministers must exercise "leadership and community cohesion which coerces no one but elicits consent."

"I don't think we can go back to ... an unquestioning sense of authority, nor do I think we should."

One model is for pastors to view themselves as "discerners and facilitators" to help all Christians identify and use spiritual gifts within churches, he said.

-- Presenting Christianity as "living and dynamic."

While church traditions are valid and important, Clapp said, times change, and so must the way believers view the world.

"The question for a living tradition becomes not do we believe exactly what our ancestors did but are we living in congruity with the convictions of our ancestors -- are we answering to the God they so faithfully followed in their time and place?" he said.

Pastors should help parishioners understand "the Bible is not a collection of static formulas," he said, adding that view sends a wrong message about the nature of Scripture. "We say to them it really is dead and irrelevant because once you get the formula down, you really are not engaged with it. You memorize it and you go on."

"The Bible is the living story of Israel and Jesus Christ," Clapp said. "The Bible drags into, pulls into, the story that has begun ... but it is not finished. I think you as pastors have the privilege of inviting people into this drama of all dramas."

-- Stressing the basis of Christian identity in Christ.

In the modern era of culture wars, people are called to identify themselves in terms of race, gender, sexual orientation, politics and the like, Clapp said. "How much more important for us to see that baptism is more basic than any of this."

He urged pastors to "recognize in this culture we are constantly being set apart from one another." He suggested that pastors emphasize rituals like baptism and the Lord's Supper and other "actions that shape our characters."

-- Including "the practice of prayer as if it really matters."

While prayer already has a place at most religious events, "too often it is perfunctory," Clapp said. "I think it's very important that in so much of our lives we are practical atheists."

Time demands, noise and clutter of a mass-media culture undermine prayer, he said, as does a consumer attitude. "Prayer, as we know, is not about getting something but about communication with and waiting on God," he said.

"Narcissism and self-centeredness are promoted" in a consumer culture, Clapp said. Prayer, on the other hand, "is about centering on God and not self," he said. "Prayer is definitely a counter-cultural practice."
He urged pastors to "be known as persons of prayer, people who really do think God rules the cosmos."
"In short, what we need is pastors who are Christians."

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Vestal challenges moderates to rebuild Baptist 'ethos'

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Moderate Baptists should engage in "intergenerational partnering" to build and pass on a "system" and "ethos" lost when conservatives took over the Southern Baptist Convention, according to moderate leader Daniel Vestal.

Vestal, coordinator of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group based in Atlanta, told a conference crowd in Birmingham, Ala., that moderates need a Baptist heritage of which they can feel proud.

"It is time for traditional Baptists to reclaim their birthright and blessing," Vestal told an Oct. 6-7 "Leadership with Integrity" conference sponsored by the Baptist Center for Ethics.

Vestal, 52, said ministers of his generation "were given a system and structure" within the SBC. "We felt in some ways we could fit into that system. We were given an ethos." Young ministers entered seminary "with the idea that we would fit into that ethos and perpetuate it."

"In the last 20 years, that system has been destroyed and that ethos no longer fits in," Vestal said.

Moderates who are now in their 40s have known only a denomination embroiled in turmoil. As a result, Vestal said they were "cheated out of a corporate communal experience that promoted them and blessed them."

"There is not a Baptist culture of which they are proud, to which they feel they belong, to which they feel indebted and they wish to pass on to others. They do not feel blessed and mentored, so they feel little impulse to bless and mentor," Vestal said.

Vestal said the SBC controversy affected generations in different ways.

Moderates 60 and older "are still fighting the war, or they're still under the illusion the old ethos is still in place," Vestal said.

Those in their 50s "have by and large stopped fighting the war," he said, but are "having a difficult time" letting go of the past.

About those between 40 and 50, Vestal hesitated. "I don't know where they are. They're kind of in la-la land. They don't remember a time the ethos was good. They care desperately about the gospel and about the future, but ... they feel isolated."

In their 30s "not only do they not remember the war, not only do they not know about the war, they don't care about the war," Vestal said. Among this generation, however, he said he has "found much interest in the future" of the Fellowship.

The generation under 30 is "truly post-modern" and has shown "even greater interest" in the Fellowship's language about partnering and networking as opposed to building top-down denominational structures, he said.

For moderate Baptists to survive such fragmentation, Vestal called for "intergenerational partnering" in which individuals get to know one another across generational lines. Personal and ministerial mentoring "is a two-way street," Vestal said. "It takes place in both directions."

"Unless moderate Baptists, traditional Baptists, learn to practice intergenerational partnering, the Baptist witness in this country is in real danger," Vestal said.

"I believe the creation of a new Baptist culture and new Baptist community is dependent on partnering," he said. "No one group can do it alone. No one segment in Baptist life can do it alone. And no one generation in Baptist life can do it alone."

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CBF 'envoys' build church, lives, in Kazakhstan

By Robert O'Brien

ALMATY, Kazakhstan (ABP) -- Baptist lay people from America have found new lives at the end of a "rainbow" in the former Soviet republic of Kazakhstan.

Ross and Martha King helped build that "rainbow" in the predominantly Muslim city of Almaty. And their 100-member Rainbow Church in the hard-to-reach city of 1.3 million people has become a working model for a new Cooperative Baptist Fellowship program seeking to network secularly employed Christians around the globe.

The Atlanta-based Fellowship's new "Envoy" plan is to develop a worldwide partnership between lay professionals, churches back home, and CBF missionaries.

The Fellowship expects Envoys to become a key element of its missions approach at home and abroad in "a world without borders," said Tom Prevost, who will develop and guide the new program. "Envoys is our up-to-date version of the biblical example of Paul's supporting himself as a tent maker to share the good news of Jesus Christ effectively," he said.

The Kings recently joined the Envoy program, having already launched the church in Almaty, along with other American Christians there. They were in Almaty for two years to teach in an MBA program at the new Kazakh Institute of Management and Economic Strategy.

They laid groundwork for the church by offering courses on how to start a small business and English. They gradually launched Bible studies.

Gradually, the Kings, who now operate a small business in Kazakhstan, have built a network of relationships and have changed people's lives with their smiles, love and openness in the repressed former communist culture.

Observers say Rainbow Church and related ministries illustrate that lay people can open lines of communication without barriers and stereotypes often faced by career missionaries.

Lay professionals can create "synapses" -- connections -- that often can make stronger links with everyday people than missionaries can," said Doug Tipps, pastor of First Baptist Church in San Marcos, Texas, the Kings' home church.

Members of the Texas church have become increasingly involved in the Kings' overseas ministry, which echoes the congregation's philosophy which "encourages members to express their call from God and then helps them fulfill it," Tipps said.

When the Kings quit teaching, they started, with one of their students, a small import/export business in Kazakhstan, supporting themselves in that way as they continue to minister.

Eventually, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship sent Bob Potts, a Georgia Baptist pastor, to Almaty to serve as pastor of Rainbow Church. He and his wife, Dorothy, want to help the church become self-supporting and project its ministry more effectively in the densely-populated capital city.

Tipps said he believes the Fellowship's envoy approach will broaden the scope of missions and give new emphasis to the idea that all people, not just professional ministers, should be involved in missions.

The Fellowship will not become an employment agency, said Prevost, associate coordinator of the Fellowship's global missions branch.

"There are jobs out there we know about -- everywhere from Buffalo, N.Y., to China," he said. "Envoys can be educators, business entrepreneurs, engineers, medical personnel, government employees and in a variety of other professions.

"But we're not trying to fill specific jobs as much as to seek committed Christians willing to use the jobs they have or step out on faith and find jobs in the national and international marketplaces to earn a living while ministering."

Envoys will combine secular employment with a "proactive and intentional sharing of Christian witness and ministry" from the inner cities and immigrant populations of America to unreached people groups around the world, Prevost said. "A network of such people around the world could revolutionize global missions, revitalize local churches and add ultimate purpose to individual careers."

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