

Associated Baptist Press

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In this issue:

- **Drop in donor support prompts seminary foundation to adapt**
- **Billy Graham released from Florida hospital**
- **Ouachita Baptist University elects new president**
- **Bible society announces plan to link churches via Internet**
- **Lower court ordered to reconsider ruling in gift annuities dispute**
- **Ministers to children offer Christmas tips**
- **Correction**

Drop in donor support prompts seminary foundation to adapt

By Bob Allen

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Giving to the International Baptist Theological Seminary dropped precipitously following recent sweeping changes in the school's academic program, prompting trustees of the school located in the Czech Republic to decide it is no longer feasible to operate a development office in the United States.

As a result, Victor Varner will retire as executive vice president for development at IBTS. He will continue, however, as president of the Houston-based development office, which has raised \$1.25 million for the European school in four years.

The BTS International Development Foundation will refocus its fund-raising efforts, Varner said. Instead of raising money primarily for institutional support of the Prague seminary, the foundation will ask donors to fund scholarships for students at national seminaries across Europe.

"We hope to continue to have a very positive impact and support for theological education at a time when it is growing and burgeoning at an unbelievable pace," Varner said.

Varner said the foundation will continue to work closely with IBTS. The Prague seminary expects to base its fund-raising efforts in Europe after the school's recently authorized reorganization is completed.

In September, the European Baptist Federation's executive committee approved a sweeping seminary "refocusing" recommended by IBTS trustees. The plan will transform the institution from a traditional theological seminary into a network hub offering specialized programs to supplement basic education offered by 45 national Baptist seminaries located across the continent.

The controversial change means, among other things, that current faculty will be replaced and students must transfer to finish their degrees.

Initial reports of the decision resulted in a "significant" drop in donor support, Varner said, particularly in the U.S. Varner said giving began to fall off within 10 days of the September vote by the EBF executive committee.

Varner said he believes some misunderstanding helped fuel the backlash.

Varner said some reports indicated that European Baptists were "abandoning" basic theological training, that the changes were abrupt and that the seminary is closing. None of those is true, he said.

Rather, Varner said, European Baptists decided they want to provide the first level of ministerial training in "indigenous" settings of national seminaries. Rather than duplicating those programs, IBTS will offer specialized theological studies at the master's and doctor's level in partnership with several European universities.

Though the shift caught many observers by surprise, European Baptist leaders approved the refocusing in principle as early as 1993, Varner said.

Seminary leaders had anticipated a gradual transition under a new president elected to succeed American missionary John David Hopper, who retired last May. Those plans hit an unexpected snag last summer, however, when presidential nominee Stefan Stiegler, an East German, suddenly withdrew over a disagreement with faculty over how to fill a vacant teaching position.

Under pressure from member unions, the EBF council voted 66-0, with six abstentions, Sept. 26 to redirect the academic program, effective June 1998.

The plan will discontinue the seminary's bachelor's and master's in theology programs and its "topping up" graduate courses which build on basic theological education at other schools.

In their place will be specialized instruction in missions and evangelism, Baptist and Anabaptist studies, Christian education and human rights/religious freedom. Courses will be designed to supplement, rather than duplicate, instruction at national seminaries and Bible schools in Europe, many of which have opened in recent years.

Supporters of the change said it was overdue and necessary in light of changes in Europe's political and religious landscape.

Critics of the plan, however, said European leaders caved in to demands of more conservative Baptist unions in eastern Europe, which distrusted the seminary because it was heavily influenced by the more-liberal west.

While EBF leaders discussed the seminary's future in meetings, baseless rumors of rampant liberalism at the seminary circulated in the background, according to sources. Some leaders who privately supported the seminary reportedly felt pressured to sacrifice the academic program in hopes of building east-west unity.

In the past, such differences were muted by repression of Baptists in the Soviet bloc. With the fall of the Iron Curtain in 1989, however, several unions in eastern Europe have opened their own schools and discouraged students from attending the international seminary.

The program shift came as a surprise to some of the seminary's strongest U.S. supporters, moderate Southern Baptists who had supported the school through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

The seminary became a rallying cry in the Fellowship's early days when the Southern Baptist Foreign Mission Board defunded it in 1991. The FMB opened the seminary, originally located in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, in 1949 and had continued financial support.

After conservatives replaced moderates in leadership of the Southern Baptist Convention, however, FMB trustees grew suspicious of the seminary's liberal reputation and eventually voted to abruptly cut off funds despite a promise years earlier that funding would be phased out gradually.

The Fellowship, which formed in 1991 to provide alternative missions and church programs for moderates opposed to the conservative takeover of the SBC, took over funding of the school and appointed missionaries to serve on its faculty.

Because of high operating costs and difficulties obtaining visas, the EBF voted in 1994 to sell the Switzerland campus and move the seminary to Prague.

An estimated 1,300 volunteers from Europe and America donated thousands of hours of work to renovate buildings and help relocate the seminary. Some returned to the Czech Republic for the official dedication of the new campus in April.

Varner said tensions among European Baptists do not change financial reality. "They need help and they need it bad," he said. He encouraged U.S. Baptists to continue to help provide ministerial training for Baptist leaders in Europe.

"I fear if we lose Europe at this time, when there is possibility for some real renewal and growth, it will have dire consequences," Varner said.

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Billy Graham released from Florida hospital

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Evangelist Billy Graham was discharged from a Florida hospital Dec. 9 after a week-long stay for a respiratory infection.

Graham, 79, was admitted Dec. 3 to St. Luke's Hospital in Jacksonville, Fla., suffering from pneumotitis, a mild form of pneumonia, and dehydration. Initial reports indicated Graham would be hospitalized three days. Doctors later decided to keep him for additional observation after switching him from intravenous to oral antibiotics.

"We have been very encouraged by Dr. Graham's quick recovery," said Charles Burger, Graham's attending physician. Graham will continue to take antibiotics and was ordered to rest for the next few weeks, Burger said.

Graham was vacationing in the Caribbean when he became ill. He was brought to the Florida hospital because it was the nearest Mayo Clinic facility.

Graham was expected to remain in the Jacksonville area a few days for additional rest before heading home to North Carolina for the Christmas holidays.

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-- By ABP staff

Ouachita Baptist University elects new president

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. (ABP) -- Ouachita Baptist University administrator Andrew Westmoreland will take over as the school's president Jan. 1, trustees of the Baptist school in Arkadelphia, Ark., announced Dec. 11.

Westmoreland, 40, currently is executive vice president. He will succeed 67-year-old Ben Elrod, the university's 13th president, who becomes chancellor with responsibilities in fund raising and public relations.

Elrod has been president of the school since 1988. During his term, enrollment increased a third -- to 1,600 students -- and the university's endowment more than doubled, to \$29 million.

Westmoreland, an Arkansas native, has worked at Ouachita since graduating from the school in 1979. He has worked in student services, development, alumni affairs, as an assistant to the president and as executive vice president since 1995.

"I feel very comfortable with the fact that Andy Westmoreland was chosen to succeed me in the presidency," Elrod said. "I have every confidence that he will do a superb job and that Ouachita will continue on the path of progress."

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-- By ABP staff

Bible society announces plan to link churches via Internet

NEW YORK (ABP) -- The American Bible Society has pledged \$5 million to link every church in North America to the World Wide Web.

The Houses of Worship (HOW) project has a goal of networking an estimated 300,000 churches in the United States and Canada through the Internet. Churches which sign up for the program will receive four free pages on the HOW website.

The \$5 million is for initial funding until next summer, reported Ecumenical News International. The project is expected to go world-wide by 2000.

Officials said the Internet can help churches connect with their members, with each other and with the communities they serve. The New York-based Bible society hopes to benefit by closer contact with churches using its products.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The American Bible Society's Houses of Worship website address is: <http://www.housesofworship.net>

Lower court ordered to reconsider ruling in gift annuities dispute

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court has ordered a lower court to decide if a new law passed by Congress requires dismissal of a class-action lawsuit involving religious and other charitable organizations.

The lawsuit, pending in a federal district court in Texas, accuses charitable groups of "price fixing" in setting rates on charitable gift annuities and remainder trusts. Charitable groups say the suit threatens their ability to raise funds.

The high court's Dec. 8 order vacated an earlier refusal by the 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals to dismiss the lawsuit and ordered the case to be reconsidered in light of the Charitable Donation Antitrust Immunity Act of 1997. Enacted last summer, the law clarifies that Congress intends that charitable gift annuities and trusts be exempt from federal antitrust laws.

Charitable gift annuities and remainder trusts are used by religious, educational and other charitable organizations to raise funds. Under these plans, donors making substantial gifts to institutions receive a fixed income for life and are allowed a tax deduction for the difference between the value of their donation and the income received. The amount of income a donor receives is affected by the annuity rate, the donor's age and the amount of the original donation.

In setting rates for gift annuities, many charitable groups follow the recommendations of the American Council of Gift Annuities, which represents more than 1,500 charitable organizations. The council's recommended rates, which are lower than commercial rates, are calculated to yield the charities 40 percent to 60 percent of the amount originally donated.

In the Texas lawsuit, Boyd Richie, guardian of the estate of Louise Peter, contends the widespread use of the council's rates constitutes price fixing in violation of antitrust laws.

The council and other defendants were rebuffed when they asked the district court to dismiss the lawsuit. In late 1995, Congress passed a law providing that certain non-profit groups -- including religious, charitable and

educational organizations -- do not violate federal antitrust laws when they use the same annuity rates for gift annuities.

Armed with the 1995 law, the council and other defendants again sought to have the lawsuit dismissed, but again the district court and the appeals court refused.

Congress returned to the legislative drawing board, specifying in its 1997 law that federal antitrust laws and similar state laws "shall not apply to charitable gift annuities or charitable remainder trusts." The new law also provides immunity from lawsuits for those involved in administering charitable gift annuities and remainder trusts. States have through 1998 to override application of the new federal law to state antitrust laws.

The 1997 legislation had broad bipartisan support, led by Reps. Henry Hyde, R-Ill., and John Conyers, D-Mich., and Sens. Paul Coverdell, R-Ga., and Chris Dodd, D-Conn.

In urging passage, House Judiciary Committee Chairman Hyde noted that the nation is asking more and more from charitable organizations.

"With the help of charitable organizations, we stretch our government dollars to feed more hungry people, build homes for the poor and care for the less fortunate," Hyde said. "Every dollar raised by these organizations is needed to help the mission of the charity."

Coverdell noted that charities have spent more than \$20 million defending themselves in the class-action lawsuit and said the new law was needed to protect them "from spending millions of dollars more on litigation instead of charitable purposes."

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Ministers to children offer Christmas tips

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Direct, hands-on activities can help children celebrate the true meaning of Christmas, say several experts in ministry to children.

Parents, grandparents and friends can help children comprehend Christmas by allowing them to participate in celebrations, they said. And children learn best from simple celebrations, they added.

While adults revel in the rich symbolism of Christmas, children need concrete images and involvement, said Tommy Sanders, manager of preschool biblical studies for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

"The key thing is to make Christmas something children can understand and relate to," Sanders said. "Sometimes symbols are good for adults, but children don't make the transition," he said. "You've got to bring those strong Christmas traditions down to children's level."

Another way children learn about Christmas is by watching adults, especially parents, celebrate Jesus' birth, added Diane Lane, minister of childhood education at First Baptist Church of Oak Cliff in Dallas.

"The parents' focus is going to come out in everything they do at Christmastime," Lane said. "Hopefully, that focus is on Jesus Christ and making sure the children know Christ is the center of their celebration."

Churches, naturally, support family traditions by celebrating Advent, the four-week period of preparation leading up to Christmas day, said Hazel Morris, associate professor of childhood education at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Churches and families ought to be partners in making Christmas meaningful for children, she said.

The ministers suggested a variety of traditions and activities to make Christmas meaningful for children.

They include:

-- Preparing for Jesus' birthday with an Advent wreath or Advent calendar.

Children enjoy the soft glow of candles on an Advent wreath, as well as praying and singing during family worship time, Morris said.

While many Christians light weekly Advent candles symbolizing hope, peace, joy and love, Sanders recommended talking about Christmas characters while lighting the candles.

For his family, the candles represent prophets who foretold Jesus' birth; Bethlehem, Jesus' birthplace; shepherds; and angels.

"Children can hang the story on individuals, rather than abstract words they don't understand," he explained.

-- Giving gifts to others.

"Keeping materialism out of Christmas is impossible; children want things," Lane conceded. "But if parents try to give and give and give, children's wants won't be satisfied. Helping them learn to give strengthens their understanding of Christmas."

That can be as simple as taking candy and cookies to neighbors and friends, Lane and Morris said. Or delivering homemade cards, Sanders added.

David Butts, children's minister at First Baptist Church in Lewisville, Texas, asks children after Christmas what they gave as well as what they received. Often, their answers about giving are more animated than their reports of gifts received, he said.

He also urges families to involve their children in projects that provide Christmas gifts for others in the community who have needs. "Let your children be part of shopping for someone who might not have another Christmas gift," he said.

-- Using Nativity sets to help children learn about Jesus' birth.

"You ought to have a nativity set kids can play with," Wiley said. "And not a fragile set, made of porcelain, up on the shelf." His children have played with a set their family made out of barn wood.

"Children can talk about Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus and the animals" as they play with the Nativity pieces, Lane explained. "It's real. They make it a part of their Christmas."

-- Reading about Christmas.

"One of my own most vivid memories of childhood is that my mother never would allow us to open our presents until we had read the Christmas story from the second chapter of the Gospel of Luke," Wiley recalled. "Now, my oldest kids get to be the readers."

Easy-to-read Bibles often have several stories that make Jesus' coming live for children, Sanders advised.

And many other good Christmas books expose children to all the meaning and flavor of the Christmas season, Lane said, noting children love for their parents to read to them.

-- Decorating the Christmas tree.

"There are different ways to make it meaningful," Morris said. "We can talk about eternal life with the evergreen, about Jesus being the Light of the World when we hang the lights, and the ornaments help us think about the fruits of the Spirit."

Older children enjoy making Christmas ornaments, ornaments that symbolize facets and themes of Christmas, Sanders said.

Wiley's children have their own ornament and collectibles boxes, where they keep Christmas items they make or have been given. They use those to decorate both the tree and their own rooms, he said.

-- Singing Christmas carols.

"Carols help children express the true meaning of Christmas. We sing as often as we can," Butts said of celebrating the season with his young children.

Singing also is a way children can lead in family worship, Morris added. "Let them take part in leadership," she urged, noting that strengthens their sense of participation.

-- Keeping Santa in his place.

"We never had 'real' Santa; we always talked about 'pretend' Santa," Lane said, "so they would know the real focus was on Jesus."

-- Developing unique family traditions.

Wiley's entire family sleeps under the Christmas tree one night each season. "It's just a warm time to be together and talk and snuggle," he said.

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CORRECTION: The Dec. 9 ABP story "Virginia-SBC partnership not a true one, says president" contains an error in the fifth paragraph. Bill Wilson has not served on the Coordinating Council of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, as the story states, but he was a member of the search committee that nominated Daniel Vestal as the group's coordinator. ABP regrets the error.

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