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Evangelical scholar harbors 'misgivings' about Mormonism

By Bob Allen

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Despite his ground-breaking dialogue with Mormonism, evangelical scholar Craig Blomberg said he harbors "remaining misgivings" about the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Blomberg, with Mormon theologian Stephen Robinson, co-authored the book "How Wide the Divide? A Mormon and an Evangelical in Conversation" to chronicle their attempts to seek common ground.

While evangelicals and Mormons hold much in common, Blomberg, a New Testament professor at Denver Seminary, said there are differences he is unable to reconcile.

"... Christians should recognize that Mormonism is something that is quite distinct and is not something that merits the title of orthodox or historic Christianity," Blomberg said in a March 17-19 convocation on "understanding Mormonism," at Samford University, a Baptist school in Birmingham, Ala.

Latter-day Saints differ from orthodox Christians in their view on Scripture, Blomberg said, as well as their understanding of the nature of God and Christ and the meaning of salvation.

"The Mormons have a larger canon than we do," he said. In addition to the Old and New Testaments, Latter-day Saints regard the Book of Mormon and shorter works attributed to Mormon founder Joseph Smith as authoritative.

Blomberg critiqued Mormon writings by observing they "make very good sense as 19th-century documents" but "make very little sense" in the ancient settings from which they purport to originate.

The Book of Mormon is "written in beautiful King-James English," Blomberg said. The similarity is understandable because the King James Version was the only Bible known to Joseph Smith, Blomberg said, but it differs from more accurate translations of ancient biblical texts found in modern readings.

It also deals with issues that would have been current when Smith purportedly translated the Book of Mormon from inscriptions on long-lost golden plates in 1830, such as the eternal destiny of people who lived in North America before Christians arrived. "That was a pressing theological question in the 1830s, and the Book of Mormon answers it," he said.

The Mormon view that God once was a mortal and still has a physical body runs contrary to historical Christianity's view that "God is spirit," Blomberg said. The Mormon view that "as man now is, God once was; as God now is, man may be" can lead to polytheism, Blomberg said, arguments notwithstanding by Mormon theologians that humans in their exalted state remain "subordinate" to God.

Mormons reject the Trinity, observing the term is not in the Bible and arguing the concept reflects corruption by Greek philosophy. Blomberg responded, however, that "at least the impetus" for trinitarian teaching can be found in the New Testament.

With Mormons' rejection of the Incarnation, he said, "it's not clear we can have an adequate substitutionary atonement -- God doing for humans in his own person what we could never do for ourselves."

Mormons say they agree with evangelicals that salvation comes by grace, but their view of what happens after death is based heavily on works, Blomberg said. Mormons believe heaven has three stages, with the highest level reserved for those who convert to Mormonism and live good lives.

"For all their talk about grace, our perception is that the Mormon religion very easily turns into legalism," Blomberg said.

He said Mormon critics believe evangelicals are against good works, a charge Blomberg denied. While good works cannot save a person, he said, evangelicals "believe that a life transformed by the indwelling spirit of God will by necessity produce good works."

Noting that Mormons believe lower levels of salvation are available to non-Mormons and that people have an opportunity to respond to the gospel after they die, Blomberg suggested that Latter-day Saints consider the "wager" argument of French philosopher Blaise Pascal: "what's at stake if I'm right and they're wrong?"

"If the Mormon is right," Blomberg said, " ... I will at least make it to the middle of three heavenly kingdoms. I don't have much to lose if he's right and I'm wrong.

"What's at stake if I'm right and he's wrong and it's only heaven or hell? He doesn't make it to heaven.

"I think those are questions we have to ask in any interreligious conversation," Blomberg said.

In another lecture in the series, interfaith-witness expert Gary Leazer proposed a "historical-development" approach to understanding Mormonism, "because with all religions, including Southern Baptists, we're often influenced by the culture in which we find ourselves as much as by Scripture."

Mormonism is a "uniquely American religion," which arose at the same time as various sectarian groups in the years following the Second Great Awakening, said Leazer, president of the Center for Interfaith Studies in Stone Mountain, Ga.

Joseph Smith "was able to read the religious and social trends of his day," Leazer said, helping the church to prosper as contemporary movements faded away. Smith capitalized on speculation about the origin of Native Americans by forwarding the view that they were descended from the lost 10 tribes of Israel. His writings also provided explicit answers for theological questions of the day and refuted teachings of dominant Calvinism, Leazer said.

Smith said the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints has recently responded to harsh criticism of its teachings by emphasizing family values and good public relations.

"I predict the Mormon Church will continue to present itself in a positive high road while accusing its critics of negative mudslinging," Leazer said. "Critics will continue to highlight the uniqueness of Mormon teachings and contrast them with historical Christian doctrine."

Such criticism may help Mormons to "take a look" at their own church's teaching, Leazer predicted.

Jerry Falwell to speak at training event

By Steve DeVane

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Some Southern Baptists are upset that independent Baptist Jerry Falwell will be appearing at Ridgecrest Conference Center this summer during the Baptist Sunday School Board's National Conference for Church Leadership.

"I can't believe the man who called all pastors who graduated from Southeastern [Baptist Theological] Seminary a bunch of 'duds' deserves being heard in the Southern Baptist Convention," said Grady Faulk, pastor of Stough Memorial Baptist Church in Pineville, N.C.

Falwell made the remark when he spoke at the seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., in March 1997.

"I thank God that one day, Virginia, the most liberal of all Baptist states in the nation, and North Carolina, who has the dubious distinction of being number-two worst, will have the best because of Southeastern producing the pastors, the mentors, the leaders who will replace the duds with good Bible-teaching and Bible-preaching pulpits," he said.

Charles Willis, a Sunday School Board spokesman, confirmed Falwell will preach at the conference.

Mike Miller, director of the church leadership services division for the Sunday School Board, said in a written statement that "a number of past NCCL attendees" requested Falwell as a speaker.

"We feel that his presence will strengthen the program," Miller said. "And, we are delighted to have him as one of our speakers."

People at the conference will be "challenged and stretched by hearing a variety of voices," Miller said.

"NCCL is a national conference focusing on leadership issues in the local church," he said. "Historically a variety of speakers both within and outside the convention have been invited to address the conference."

Faulk said he doesn't believe Southern Baptist money should be used to bring Falwell to Ridgecrest.

"If churches would have wanted our money to go to Jerry Falwell, we would have sent our money up to Liberty University," he said. Falwell is founder and chancellor of Liberty.

Faulk said he believes that thousands share his belief that Falwell shouldn't speak at Ridgecrest. One such person is John Setchfield, pastor of Pleasant Gardens Baptist Church in Marion, N.C.

"I'm disappointed that he would be given an audience with our folks as politically motivated as he seems to be," Setchfield said. "He does a lot of name-calling and character bashing."

Setchfield said Falwell's politics are his own business.

"I don't want to get Southern Baptists caught up in that," he said.

A Falwell spokesman confirmed that Falwell will be speaking the evening of June 26 at the NCCL but would not comment further.

Promotional literature from the Sunday School Board says the conference is meant for professional staff and lay people.

The conference "is designed to inspire, motivate, uplift, encourage and train today's church leaders for ministry in the 21st century," the literature says.

The conference is the latest connection between Falwell and the SBC.

In 1996, Falwell's church, Thomas Road Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., contributed \$1,000 to the Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia, a group that broke off from the Baptist General Association of Virginia. Half of the money went to the SBC, which made Falwell a member of the SBC. Falwell later denied joining the convention, saying he wanted to stay an independent Baptist.

Several prominent Southern Baptists, including former SBC presidents Bailey Smith and Jerry Vines, have spoken at conferences sponsored by Falwell. Vines is chair of Liberty's board of trustees.

Smith, Vines and James Merritt, chair of the SBC Executive Committee, are scheduled to speak at Falwell's "Super Conference 1998" in October.

Paige Patterson, who is now president of Southeastern and likely the next president of the SBC, turned down Falwell's offer of the presidency at Liberty in 1991. Last year, Patterson called Falwell his "mentor of worldwide rabble-rousing."

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IBTS moving toward 'refocusing,' despite criticism, leaders say

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (ABP) -- Despite criticism, leaders of the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, continue to move forward with a "refocusing" of the school's academic program, according to a statement released March 23.

The statement followed recent criticism calling on leaders to reverse a decision last fall to alter the school, formerly located in Ruschlikon, Switzerland, from a traditional seminary to a program supplementing basic theological education offered by national Baptist seminaries across Europe.

"Despite rumors to the contrary, IBTS is not closing but is refocusing to better serve European Baptists and to expand the work of IBTS in certain strategic areas," according to a press release issued by Keith Jones, chairman of the seminary's board of trustees.

A spokesperson for Jones, deputy general secretary of the Baptist Union of Great Britain, said other leaders had endorsed the press release and that it would be offered for approval of the European Baptist Federation executive committee at an upcoming meeting.

Associated Baptist Press reported March 19 that 56 former teachers, students and "friends" of the seminary had signed on to a letter urging the EBF to reconsider the September "refocusing" of the seminary. Among allegations leveled by critics is that the vote amounts to closing the Prague seminary.

Jones and other leaders responded that the refocusing calls for the seminary to offer specialized master's degrees, as well as graduate and post-graduate study, in addition to new continuing-education programs aimed at a wider segment of European Baptists.

The refocusing was approved by "a massive majority" of the EBF council and has been affirmed by many Baptist leaders in Europe, according to the press release. In addition, it reports, "continuing support has been indicated by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship."

The statement said IBTS is needed "to be of help" to national seminaries and Bible schools in Europe, but added that "the position and work of IBTS is very different from that in the Communist era."

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 seminaries and Bible schools across Europe, many of which have sprung up in recent years.

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

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.

The press release said trustees are currently searching for a new person to head up the work of the seminary and "ensure that IBTS remains a center of excellence and a unique resource for our European Baptist family in key areas of concern, as the hub of the network of national Baptist seminaries and colleges throughout Europe."

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-- By Bob Allen

High court refuses to revive 1995 Ohio abortion law

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Over the objection of three conservative justices, the U.S. Supreme Court refused March 23 to revive a 1995 Ohio law that would have sharply restricted abortions after the fetus is able to live outside the womb.

Returning to the bench following a two-week recess, justices also refused to hear a Florida woman's challenge to a state law banning prostitution.

The high court's order rejecting Ohio's appeal came without comment from the majority. The three dissenters, however, led by Justice Clarence Thomas, argued that the court's failure to hear the case may raise questions about the constitutionality of abortion restrictions in other states.

The order left standing two lower-court decisions invalidating the law.

In a 2-1 ruling, the 6th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals said the Ohio law's ban on post-viability abortion was unconstitutionally vague and that it failed to provide an exception for cases where the mental health, as well as the physical health, of the pregnant woman is at risk.

The Ohio law would have permitted post-viability abortions only when the pregnant woman's physical health is at risk.

The appeals court said the Constitution requires that in barring post-viability abortions, states must "provide a health exception that includes where a woman is faced with the risk of severe psychological or emotional injury which may be irreversible."

The appeals court also invalidated a provision in the law that barred use of a late-term abortion procedure labeled by abortion opponents as "partial-birth" abortion and known as dilation and extraction in the medical community.

The appeals court said the law defined the "D and X" procedure in a way that confused it with another procedure known as dilation and evacuation.

By also banning "D and E" abortions -- the most common procedure used in terminating pregnancies during the second trimester -- the act places "an unconstitutional burden on a woman's right to choose to have an abortion," the appeals court said.

Thomas, joined by Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justice Antonin Scalia, noted that 38 states have enacted post-viability abortion restrictions. Most of those, he said, do not contain an exception for mental-health reasons.

"If the decision below stands," Thomas wrote, "it is likely to create needless uncertainty about the constitutionality of many of those statutes as well."

The Ohio law was challenged by the Women's Medical Professional Corp. and Martin Haskell, a physician affiliated with the medical group.

Abortion opponents said the ruling would have no effect on ongoing efforts to pass federal and state laws banning partial-birth abortion.

In the Florida case, the Supreme Court declined to disturb lower-court decisions dismissing a Florida woman's challenge to a state ban against prostitution.

The woman, identified by the pseudonym as Jane Roe II, argued that criminalization of prostitution "discriminates against women -- as well as the single, and unmarried, the handicapped, the mutilated, the ugly and the elderly."

In her petition, Roe II argued that the right to have sex is a "fundamental, constitutional, human, civil and God-given right."

U.S. District Judge Jose Gonzales said the woman failed to show that the anti-prostitution statute "placed 'a substantial obstacle in the path' of her decision to engage in consensual sexual activities" and that her "true complaint is that she is forbidden from profiting financially from engaging in sex."

In a decision later upheld by the 11th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, Gonzalez refused to "second guess the collective decision of the citizens of Florida to prohibit the sale or purchase of sexual services."

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'FOSLs' dedicate themselves to preserving historic books

By Carolyn Chapman

LIBERTY, Mo. (ABP) -- Wearing cloth gloves, they pore over their subject, risking disease at every turn. They work cautiously, knowing one false move could destroy the delicate material. They're archaeologists of sorts, preserving and repairing volumes from the private library of the great Baptist pastor Charles Haddon Spurgeon.

The Friends of the Spurgeon Library, who fondly refer to themselves as FOSLs, are volunteers from all over the United States. They work diligently to restore the books of the Victorian minister, who lived from 1834 to 1892. Some of the books date from the late 1400s; most are in desperate need of repair.

"Many of the books are infected with a fungus that spreads to nearby books and to those handling the books," said Jerry Cain, college chaplain and collegiate vice president of William Jewell College in Liberty, Mo., where the collection is housed.

In fact, Mary Henry, who rebinds the books, was hospitalized after coming in direct contact with the fungus. Antibiotics cleared the infection.

To protect both the handlers and other books, contaminated books are wrapped in a special paper until they can be rebound. Currently, the volunteers repair about 50 volumes per year.

Housed on the lower level of the college's library, the Spurgeon collection contains 6,618 volumes. It includes many of Spurgeon's personal works, as well as those of other noted Christian writers.

Spurgeon was one of the most prominent English Baptist pastors of the 19th century. In 1859, he preached in the Crystal Palace in London to a congregation of 23,654 people.

The collection has been described as the world's finest library of Puritan literature. Among its treasures: the first edition serial "All the Year Round," a weekly journal published by Charles Dickens.

"Most of his novels came out one chapter at a time in a magazine," Cain said. "At the end of the year, the articles were bound together in one book. We have the original articles."

The library also contains collections of hymns by Issac Watts, John Rippon and Samuel, John and Charles Wesley. Editions of the Bible include the Englishman's Greek New Testament, which provides the Greek text and interlinear literal translation, and The Prefaces to the Early Editions of Martin Luther's Bible, which illustrate the reformer's principle of "justification through faith."

The oldest book in the collection is a commentary on the book of Psalms by Cardinal Juan de Torquemada. It is written in Latin and was published in Rome in 1476.

William Jewell College secured the Spurgeon Collection in 1906. During the sessions of the Missouri Baptist Convention in 1905, it was announced that the personal library of Charles Haddon Spurgeon was available for purchase in London for 500 pounds. In less than 10 minutes, Jewell negotiated to buy the collection and have it transferred to the campus.

A replica of Spurgeon's personal library serves as the focal point of the collection. After cataloging the entire collection, the volunteers are concentrating on restoring the volumes that line the shelves around the desk.

As they gingerly thumb through the books, they search for Spurgeon's personal notes. "Any margin notes or underlined text give us insight into what Spurgeon found interesting," Cain said. "In some cases, we've discovered letters between the pages. Those are a real find. There are a wealth of curiosities waiting to be uncovered here."

One of the volunteer archaeologists is Bill Lancaster, president of the FOSLs. "I believe the Spurgeon Library represents a clear expression of the ministry of the gospel of Christ," Lancaster remarked. "It would be a shame to see this collection deteriorate, so we dedicate our time to making the books useful again -- for Jewell students, scholars and the general public."

Keeping Baptist history alive motivates board member and FOSL founder Gary Long. "I sense a growing apathy among Baptists today toward our heritage," he said. "But we must understand our past before we can chart our future."

"We have a wonderful heritage of faith, and this library represents a great part of that rich past. We must work hard to preserve it."

His commitment is shared by many across the nation, with board members ranging from pastors to business people from Maryland to California.

Lancaster, who is vice president of sales for Associated Grocers in Grandview, Mo., has been a fan of Spurgeon since the age of 18. "His theology is clear, and he is easy to read," he pointed out. "His writings manifest the message of Christ, and I want to be a part of lifting up his example."

Both Lancaster and Long agree that it's easy to become frustrated when faced with their daunting task, but they find the company of fellow members energizes them. "We've got a lot of work ahead of us, but we are all serious about the work and focused on its importance," Lancaster said. "We're all busy people, but it's important to come together to achieve a common goal."

The Friends would like to rebind 700 books in the next six months, which will require an aggressive membership drive. Lancaster believes that the drive isn't about money but rather about working for the glory of Christ.

When he dreams about the future of the library, he would like to uncover other books in Spurgeon's collection that the pastor's family members may have. He also would like to see an on-site bookstore selling Spurgeon's works and, in a perfect world, he would like the library housed in a separate building.

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Missouri Baptist school trains Christian clowns

By Stacey Hamby

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Christians across the nation are donning wigs and stepping into oversized shoes to share the gospel.

"They realize that through Christian clowning they can present the gospel in such a way that people not only hear it -- they see it," said Don Anders, creative-ministries leader for the Missouri Baptist Convention.

"A clown by the very nature of being a clown has access to places and circumstances a pastor or regular church person would not have entry into."

Anders said a growing demand for training of Christian clowns is the reason for a February clown school sponsored by the Missouri Baptist Convention. With about 350 participants, it is the largest Christian clown school in the nation, Anders said.

Clowns from six states have attended the interdenominational training school for the past two years. Future plans are to make it a nationwide conference.

Anders said he is pleasantly surprised by the growth of Christian clowning. "When I started this ministry 13 years ago, I thought it would be a fad ministry, and that eventually the conference would fade into the sunset," he admitted. "I've been amazed it has grown. I had thought most clowns would come from the cities, but the vast majority -- I'd say 80 percent -- come from small, country churches.

"They've discovered this is an exciting outreach in their community, and it's something they can do."

Juanita Nutter, a member of Hillcrest Baptist Church in Lebanon, Mo., is one of those people who discovered she had a knack for clowning.

"Eleven years ago, I came to the clown school to learn how to tell stories in an exciting way," she recalled. "I had no intention of being a clown. But they said I might as well try it, and, man, it was like I came to life."

Anders isn't the only one who has been surprised by the growth in clown ministry. The man who is considered the father of Christian clowning also never thought his ideas would spread worldwide.

Floyd Shaffer of Euclid, Ohio, a retired Lutheran minister, has been a speaker for Missouri's clown school, including the one this year.

"In 1968, I went into makeup for the first time," Shaffer recalled. "Most people assumed clowns went with car wash openings or dunk tanks at fairs. I started a clown ministry class. I coined the term 'clown ministry' on the spur of the moment -- there were no books on clowning, nothing out there."

Twelve people joined the class and taught themselves how to minister through clowning. Shaffer then put together an outline for the class that included a strong biblical foundation, he said.

What he did next set the course for where clown ministry is today. "Historically, people respond around words," he said. "If we listen to what Jesus said in John 1, that the Word became flesh, then we see when God wanted to get something done, he fleshed up the Word.

"So, I thought, 'What would happen if we do an entire worship service without words, but the Word is clear?' We did a traditional service but used no words. From then on, I started getting invited places."

Although Shaffer never has advertised his ministry, it has spread around the world. Publishers asked him to write books; he's won awards, he's taught clown schools in more than 50 denominations. But, of course, it all was part-time.

"I jokingly call myself Johnny Clownseed," he said. "I'm just a one-gift person, and I gave it to God."

The different denominations never seem to have a problem with asking Shaffer to speak, either. "I guess when you don't talk, people can hear you in their own faith language."

Shaffer, whose clown name is "Socataco," said he is amazed with how much clown ministry has developed in the past 30 years. "I did it for myself and for my friends, and the fact that others caught that spark continues to awe me," he said. "I hope clowning will continue to grow."

But, he added, there is one important key to Christian clowning: "Good, effective clowning is done only if the person under the makeup is a Christian -- whether in makeup or out of makeup."

Top-rated rodeo clown uses platform for God

By Stacey Hamby

MOUNT VERNON, Mo. (ABP) -- He has entertained in nearly every major arena, including Madison Square Garden in New York. He has appeared in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day parade. He has even done the weather with Willard Scott of NBC's Today show. And all because he's one of the best at what he does -- rodeo clowning.

Mike Ulmer of Mount Vernon, Mo., has been named Clown of the Year by the International Professional Rodeo Association (IPRA) for two consecutive years. Numerous other awards, usually in the form of engraved belt buckles, line shelves in his home. But he says belt buckles don't matter as much as living for the Lord.

"What I do is a talent many people may not want," said Ulmer, a member of Mount Vernon's First Baptist Church. "But I'll do anything I can to use my talents for God."

The rodeo clown's job is twofold -- distracting the bull and entertaining the crowd. Ulmer describes his entertainment as cornball comedy. "When I'm standing on a barrel with a wireless mike on, I'm entertaining 5-year-olds to 80-year-olds," he said. "Good, clean, family comedy is hard. That's why I use a lot of animals." His animals include a pony named Scamp and a dog named Katy.

Although Ulmer has traveled around the nation clowning at rodeos, last year was the first time he took his talents to the mission field. "I told God that if he ever gave me the opportunity to do what I do for his benefit, then I'd do it," Ulmer said.

He got his chance in 1997. The only weekend he did not have a rodeo scheduled was the weekend his pastor, Gary Gilmore, asked if he could join the church's mission team to Wyoming. In costume and using his animals, Ulmer drew a crowd at a fairground arena in Rock Springs, Wyo., so the gospel could be shared.

"Mike has a real gift at opening people up through humor," Gilmore said. "He really knows how to plant a seed. They're not worrying about what's going on at home. They're laughing at what he's doing. But when you see him out there with the bulls in the arena, it's not clowning. He takes the attention off the danger and protects other people."

Ulmer acknowledged his job is dangerous. It takes courage and skill to distract a bull that has thrown off a cowboy. He takes a moment to pray before he enters the arena.

"I don't even really think about getting in the arena with a bull anymore," he said. "I've been doing it so long. I don't get nervous about taking a beating; I just dread it."

His wife, Debbie, said he's had his share of injuries, including a broken sternum and a finger that was reattached after being severed by a bull's horn. "It doesn't bother me so much now, unless I see a bull running right at him or hitting the barrel, and he's in it," said Debbie, who attends nearly all the rodeos with him. "It used to scare me to death, but he's real capable out there."

The trade may stay in the family. Their son is considering following in his father's footsteps.

"I like clowning," said Colten, 5, who joins his dad for some routines. "I've been doing this a couple of years. I always think about being a rodeo clown."

His dad noted that while the job of clowning is dangerous, it's not as dangerous as riding bulls.

"The opportunity is there for Colten to clown if he wants it," Ulmer said. "I didn't have somebody to teach clowning to me."

He learned by experience. "They have schools now for rodeo clowning," he said. "I went to the school of hard knocks."

Two years after taking his first job as a rodeo clown, he was accepted into the IPRA. "Since then, I've gotten to go a lot of places and do a lot of things that a boy from Mount Vernon wouldn't have gotten to do otherwise."

One of those opportunities was to clown for the World Finals in El Paso, Texas, in 1992 and 1993. In El Paso, Ulmer was the clown for cowboys from Mexico, Australia and Canada, as well as the United States. For five years, he worked the IPRA finals in Oklahoma City, Okla. -- the Super Bowl of rodeo.

Ulmer holds the record for number of consecutive years -- eight -- as clown for the American Cowboys Rodeo Association finals. And the Missouri Rodeo Association has recognized him for two consecutive years as its Clown of the Year.

"It's a God-given talent," Ulmer said. "I've been doing this 25 years, and it seems like the last few years, I've been blessed with more pats on the back and buckles than my fair share.

"But I can look at all the awards I've won and the TV shows I've been on, and say, 'It's not going to matter,'" he said. "Either you're a Christian or you ain't. That's what it comes down to."

Living the Christian life on the rodeo circuit isn't easy, he said. "I've struggled to try to walk where I'm supposed to," he said. "Rodeo is a sport, and in any sport, it's difficult to be a Christian. You backslide, and God gives you opportunities to get it together."

When he sees an opportunity to share his faith with other rodeo clowns and cowboys, he takes it. "When people see you walk the walk, they ask questions," he said. "One time, I said I need to go to practice for an Easter pageant, and it made the others stop and ask what I was doing, where it was and what church I was with. I had a chance to say something then."

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-- Color photos for both clown stories are available from Word and Way.

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