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Baptist leaders affirm effort to establish 'common ground'

By Trennis Henderson

(ABP) -- What impact will a recent declaration of cooperation have among Baptist leaders -- many of whom have been at odds for the past two decades?

The short answer is: Nobody really knows. Many participants, however, view the effort as a hopeful step in establishing "common ground."

The declaration of cooperation, drafted by former President Jimmy Carter, was signed by more than two dozen prominent Baptists, including leaders from the Southern Baptist Convention, Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, Baptist World Alliance and American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.

Signers of the document ranged from SBC president Tom Elliff to CBF coordinator Daniel Vestal. Baptist Sunday School Board president Jimmy Draper, Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs executive director James Dunn and Baptist World Alliance general secretary Denton Lotz also were among those who participated in the dialogues and signed the agreement.

Carter said he convened the meetings because he was "concerned about a need for increased understanding among Baptists." He said the purpose of the sessions was "to discuss differences among Baptists on historical, theological, philosophical and organizational issues."

The former president hosted two dialogue sessions at the Carter Center in Atlanta. The first meeting primarily included moderate leaders, with the second gathering involving conservative leaders. Following the discussion, Carter drafted a statement designed to "encapsulate what we considered to be a consensus of the two meetings." He submitted the proposal to the participants for their input and approval.

In signing the document, the Baptist leaders acknowledged "there are unresolved issues among us" but expressed a "wish to overcome differences that may impede our mission, which is to bring about a spiritual awakening in our nation and around the world." The declaration specifically addresses the issues of racial reconciliation and religious persecution.

Participants also pledged to "treat each other with mutual respect as brothers and sisters in Christ" and to "seek ways to cooperate to achieve common goals, without breaching our Baptist polity or theological integrity, in order that people may come to know Christ as Savior...."

"We weren't all in the same room at the same time," acknowledged Draper, president of the Baptist Sunday School Board. But the process "sought to find some common ground in the struggle we've had the past 20 years" in Southern Baptist life, he said.

"It does help us focus on some things that are positive rather than the things that separate us," he said. "I think it's a good step to say we're brothers and we have differences but we can work together."

Citing the commitment to "pray for each other and treat each other kindly," Draper remarked, "Those are very worthy goals. How could you be against it?"

"It was not a political document at all but a document among people affirming a shared belief in Jesus Christ and seeking some commonality," Draper pointed out. "I don't know what will come of it," he said, but added, "I don't think it will hurt and maybe it will help."

Vestal described the declaration as "a positive statement of Christian kindness, charity and cooperation."

While "we're still going to have areas of disagreement," Vestal said, a primary goal is for Baptist leaders to relate to one another "in a spirit of Christ and a spirit of love."

"It's an effort to find common ground to face the future not just among Southern Baptists but among all kinds of Baptists," he noted. "The Baptist family is much more complex and diverse than Southern Baptists."

"It is a step toward common tasks and to do more than just talk," the CBF leader emphasized. "It's an effort to look to the future rather than to the past."

Calling the issues addressed in the declaration "very significant," former SBC president Jim Henry added, "As far as implementing them, that will be up to people to determine what we can do beyond this. This is a starting point. It says we are trying to move ahead, recognizing some differences among us but moving ahead with issues we are all concerned about."

Henry, pastor of First Baptist Church, Orlando, Fla., said the dialogue process was a positive effort to "try to diminish putting our differences up for public discussion. We put it on a higher plane, and that's always good."

"It shows we have some common commitments we can all sign off on," Henry affirmed. "I was glad to be part of a process that moves forward the kingdom of God."

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Deadly tornadoes rip through southern states

By Laurie A. Lattimore

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A tornado with winds approaching 300 mph ripped through three Alabama counties with no remorse April 8, killing at least 32 people and injuring 220 more.

Another six people died when tornados from the same storm struck north of Atlanta.

The Alabama tornado, the most destructive in state history, hopskotchd a 20-mile path through communities west of Birmingham.

The tornado touched down in Tuscaloosa County just before 8 p.m. The high-powered winds swept northeastward, touching down again in Jefferson County, wiping out entire communities just outside the heart of Birmingham. The deadly storm stayed down for an historic 15-mile stretch, reaching into St. Clair County.

All three counties were declared federal disaster areas by President Clinton April 9. Vice President Al Gore and James Lee Whitt, national Federal Emergency Management Agency director, toured the annihilation Good Friday.

At least 1,000 central Alabama homeowners were left with nothing but rubble and nearly 900 more returned to unrecognizable homes. But they were the lucky ones.

"It's awful ... so heart-wrenching," said Kenny Allen, pastor of Concord Baptist Church just outside the Rock Creek and Oak Grove communities, where some of the worst damage occurred. "Every sixth or seventh call is someone looking for a loved one or to say they lost someone."

"What can you do? You do your best to reassure them and then you just pray," Allen said.

Concord operated as a "transition" shelter during the Wednesday disaster and served as headquarters for the disaster-relief feeding unit jointly operated by the Red Cross and Alabama Baptist State Convention.

The devastation included close to a dozen churches with severe damage, half of them Baptist. Numerous Alabama Baptist families were among the countless who lost their homes -- and in some cases neighbors and loved ones.

Bethel Baptist Church in Moody lost its existing building plus the nearly complete new sanctuary and just-completed family life center. The new structures were part of a \$3.25 million building campaign and were to be dedicated April 13.

Bethany Baptist Church in Tuscaloosa lost its roof and a chunk of the sanctuary. Sylvan Springs Baptist Church suffered major damage to its steeple. Also heavily damaged were First Baptist Church in Gary Ensley, Chapel Hill Baptist Church in McDonald Chapel, and Edgewater Baptist Church.

Red Cross and Salvation Army units were not able to get in to the Edgewater and McDonald Chapel areas until April 12, four days after the storm, reported Ricky Creech, director of missions for Birmingham Baptist Association, who is helping to coordinate cleanup efforts.

"This is going to take weeks to clean up," he said.

Disaster-relief volunteers from Louisiana, Mississippi, South Carolina and Tennessee were expected to participate in the cleanup. From within Alabama, crews from about 10 Baptist associations had worked in the feeding and cleanup efforts by April 12.

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Alabama tornado leaves behind destroyed homes, disrupted lives

By Laurie A. Lattimore

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- A teddy bear that once enjoyed a warm bed and cuddly young owner now lies face down on a cement slab -- a slab that a mere 12 hours before supported a home for a family of four. Not far away a book, "How to rebuild your porch or deck," lies submerged in mud, just below a Jeep Cherokee sitting in what is left of a tree.

One passerby walking through the rubble commented on that irony. But a relative of the homeowner was incensed at the jovial comment. "When you get done making jokes, why don't you go talk to my brother in the hospital about how they pulled him out of that tree," the relative said to the onlooker.

The April 8 twister was the most destructive on record in Alabama. It registered F-5 on the Fugita scale -- a level the Fugita scale experts reverently refer to as "God's Finger." The storm was fatal to at least 32 people in central Alabama and tragic for thousands more.

But as improbable stories of survival surfaced, some observers said "God's Finger" also demonstrated God's hand. With winds reportedly topping 300 mph, the death toll was remarkably low, experts contend. Most of the destruction was to land and material things.

"This is nothing but stuff, and stuff comes and goes," said Chris Burns, pastor of Bethel Baptist Church near Moody, about 15 miles northeast of Birmingham. The church's two new buildings, worth \$3.25 million, were flattened in mere minutes.

For a few tense minutes that seemed like forever, Burns said, he was afraid at least two people were inside the church when the deadly winds leveled the sanctuary.

"My building supervisor and his wife were going to stay at the church when everyone else went home because they thought it would be safer than their mobile home," Burns recalled. "I just began to pray, 'Lord don't let anybody be in here, and if so, don't them be hurt.' The terror just engulfs you."

The couple was spared. The building supervisor and his wife decided at the last minute to go home. "The most important thing is that no one was hurt," Burns added. "God was watching over us."

In Tuscaloosa, where the tornado first touched down, members of Bethany Baptist Church held a prayer and praise service in a hallway as the tornado whipped through the church just before 8 p.m., taking with it a chunk of the sanctuary.

As if God had a message for the members when they walked through the blown-away sanctuary, the cross that was made for the Easter pageant remained standing.

"It takes your breath away to realize what you've lived through," said Pastor Jim Roberts, describing the train-like noises they heard while singing and praying in an interior hallway. "The Lord protected us. ... He really took care of us."

Two of the church's youth were not as confident during the storm. Chad Mills admitted freely he "thought we were going to die."

But while the building damage was somewhat extensive, Roberts noted that it is important for churches to keep the right perspective on such disasters.

"You can rebuild a building," he said. "The Lord protected the church because he protected the people."

Ed Cruce, director of missions for Bessemer Association, said he had received numerous calls of damage to homes of local Baptists.

"I can't tell you the numbers of families who had damage to their homes," Cruce said. "Some of it's minor, some severe, and some lost their whole house."

Cruce also told of a member of Faith Baptist Church whose husband was in the hospital for surgery at the time of the tornado. "She took her child and huddled in the bathtub while the tornado hit," Cruce said. "They're OK."

John and Nancy Ling, members of Westwood Baptist Church in Forestdale, returned from their Easter musical dress rehearsal to find the roof of their house gone, windows blown out and the interior severely damaged by water. Their neighbor across the street had nothing left.

"It looked like a war zone," Nancy Ling said, noting that when she saw her house her first thought was whether she would have a dress for the musical. But being a procrastinator, she said, the dress "was still in the plastic bag it was shipped in, so it wasn't damaged at all."

Ricky Creech, director of missions for Birmingham Baptist Association, toured the ruins of several churches, including Edgewater Baptist Church, which was torn apart and scattered around the community. "I found the steps to the baptistry over there," Creech told the Birmingham News.

Considering the fact that Wednesday evening is a prime night for activities in Alabama Baptist churches, experts are calling it a miracle more people were not injured or killed. In fact they joke that all the people in prayer meetings probably spared their own lives.

Padgett Cope, pastor of Liberty Baptist Church in the Oak Grove area, said one neighborhood woman came to the church during the storm as Liberty members were piling into the basement. The woman, who was afraid to stay in her trailer and did not want to drive to her church, told Cope that if she were going to heaven, she would rather go from church.

"I told her there was no place safer than the Lord's house," Cope said, noting there was no damage to Liberty or any of its members. "We were very fortunate, very blessed."

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