

Associated Baptist Press

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

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SBC membership total nearing 15.9 million

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Church membership in the Southern Baptist Convention reached 15,891,514 in 1997, according to annual statistics reported by the Baptist Sunday School Board.

Membership grew by 197,464, or 1.3 percent, since last year, according to an annual church profile compiled by the denomination's publishing agency based in Nashville, Tenn.

A total of 412,027 people were baptized in Southern Baptist churches during the year, 8.6 percent more than last year and the first time in 15 years that baptism totals topped 400,000.

The number of Southern Baptist churches grew two-thirds of 1 percent, to 40,887. Those churches received more than \$7 billion in total income and in turn gave more than \$936 million to missions. The total value of church property in the convention exceeded \$32 billion.

On a given Sunday, an average of 5.2 million Southern Baptists attended morning worship services, 6.6 percent more than last year.

Sunday school enrollment dropped 1.2 percent, to 8.1 million, while enrollment in Discipleship Training, an education program typically held on Sunday nights, grew 3.6 percent, to 2.4 million.

Enrollment in Woman's Missionary Union dropped below 1 million. After posting gains the previous three years, membership in the SBC's 110-year-old women's missions auxiliary totaled 995,898, down 7 percent from last year's enrollment of 1.07 million.

Financially troubled school names new president

MT. VERNON, Ga. (ABP) -- Trustees of Brewton-Parker College have elected a new president to lead the financially troubled Baptist-affiliated school in Mt. Vernon, Ga.

David Smith, currently an administrator at Wayland Baptist University in Plainview, Texas, was elected to the post by Brewton-Parker trustees April 25.

Smith succeeds former President Lynn Holmes, who resigned last year amid charges that he and other administrators gave federally funded scholarships to unqualified students.

A settlement is reportedly near on the lawsuit, filed by a former employee who was later joined in the complaint by the federal government, which would require restitution and penalties.

Initial news reports said the suit could end up costing the college \$25.2 million in reimbursement and penalties, an amount nearly twice the school's annual budget.

The lawsuit, initiated by a former employee under a federal whistle-blowing statute, alleged that college administrators intentionally misadministered government funds to students for at least 11 years. Improper distribution of funds favored student athletes, the suit alleged. It also charged that Brewton-Parker kept funds which should have been returned to the government when inmates dropped out of classes taught by the college at prisons in Georgia.

Holmes denied specific charges in the lawsuit but admitted that errors were made in the distribution of financial aid.

Trustees and faculty were upbeat at Smith's election.

Smith told reporters he took Brewton-Parker's financial situation seriously but that he felt "comfortable" with his decision to take the job.

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-- By ABP staff

Congress approves D.C. vouchers, veto expected from White House

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- For the first time in history, a bill providing tax dollars to help pay tuition at private and parochial schools has passed both houses of Congress.

On a 214 to 206 vote April 30, the U.S. House of Representatives approved a bill providing "opportunity scholarships" to 2,000 low-income students in the District of Columbia. The money -- up to \$3,200 -- could be used to pay tuition and transportation costs for public, private and parochial schools.

The Senate approved the voucher measure last year. President Clinton is expected to veto the bill.

Supporters of the bill say the vouchers would give children an opportunity to escape from poorly performing D.C. public schools and would improve public schools forcing them to compete. The measure has been high on the agenda of Christian conservatives in Washington.

Opponents, which include those who advocate the separation of church and state, say the plan is unconstitutional and would hurt public education. D.C. residents who oppose the bill say it would only help a few while leaving 76,000 students behind in underfunded city schools.

House Majority Leader Dick Armey, R-Texas, called the vote a victory for the District's children. "They have the opportunity to escape from the sometimes violent school system that has been failing to educate these children," he said.

Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, D-D.C., said supporters of the voucher measure were willing to vote for it for the children in D.C. but not in their own districts. The House voted down a national voucher plan late last year.

Norton said the voucher is too small to pay for the high tuition fees at most private and parochial schools and that vouchers have been ruled unconstitutional by courts in Ohio and Cleveland.

"I renew my challenge to the majority to let us raise private money for private schools together, particularly because most of these schools will necessarily be religious schools that cannot be publicly funded under the Constitution of the United States," she said.

Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said passage of the voucher bill marks "a historic but sad day."

"The U.S. Congress for the first time has appropriated taxpayer dollars to finance the teaching of religion to children," Walker said. "This bill will open the door for regulation of church schools and effectively strap them with bureaucratic regulations that the majority in Congress says it detests."

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Grand-prize winners named among Baptist communicators

SAN ANTONIO (ABP) -- Two longtime Baptist journalists took grand-prize writing honors in this year's awards competition of the Baptist Communicators Association.

Winners of the W.C. Fields Awards Competition were announced during the association's annual meeting in San Antonio May 2.

Dan Martin, a news writer for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, won the Frank Burkhalter Award for exceptional achievement in news writing. His winning entry was a series of news stories about the deadly tornado that struck Jarrell, Texas, in May 1997.

Another veteran Baptist journalist, Craig Bird, administrator at Cornerstone Baptist Church in Arlington, Texas, won the Frank Burkhalter Award for exceptional achievement in feature writing. His winning entry was a feature story in Southwestern News titled "Lord, Make Us One."

A previous Burkhalter winner, Martin re-entered Baptist journalism in 1996, nearly six years after his much-publicized firing as news editor of Baptist Press.

Martin worked at Baptist Press 10 years before the SBC Executive Committee fired him and his boss, Al Shackleford, in July 1990 following a dispute over editorial freedom. Earlier, Martin worked four years for the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board. After the firings, Martin served briefly as first editor of Associated Baptist Press.

Bird and Martin were colleagues at Baptist Press in the 1980s, when Bird was features editor at the Southern Baptist Convention's news service in Nashville, Tenn. Later, he became a missionary to Africa. He recently left a post as communications director at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Among the dozens of awards in various categories presented to Baptist communications professionals from across the nation, other grand-prizes went to:

-- Ray Furr, communications director for the Southern Baptist Convention Annuity Board in Dallas, who won the M.E. Dodd Award for exceptional achievement in electronic media. His winning entry was a recruiting video for the Annuity Board.

-- Barbara Denman and the public relations staff of the Florida Baptist Convention, who won the Arthur Davenport Award for exceptional achievement in public relations and development. Their winning entry was the promotional package for the 1997 Maguire State Missions Offering.

-- Douglas Rogers, audiovisual manager for the South Carolina Baptist Convention, who won the Fon Scofield Award for exceptional achievement in photography. His winning entry was a color photograph of a Romanian shepherd.

-- Theresa Barnett and Dick Bodenhamer of Woman's Missionary Union, who won the Albert McClellan Award for exceptional achievement in print media and design. Their winning entry was titled "Image Ad Series."

Officers elected to lead BCA for the 1998-99 year were Polly House, Baptist Press, president; Barbara Denman, Florida Baptist Convention, program chairman; Eddy Oliver, Georgia Baptist Convention, program chairman-elect; Jim Veneman, Baptist Sunday School Board, awards chairman; Tommy Hughes, Alabama Baptist Convention, membership chairman; Tim Norton, North American Mission Board, treasurer (a three-year term); and Roy Jennings, retired, historian (three-year-term). Keith Beene of Nashville, Tenn., serves as administrative coordinator. A newsletter editor will be announced at the group's next meeting in Salt Lake City June 8.

Lifetime membership designations were given to Robert O'Brien and Robert Stanley, both retirees from the International Mission Board.

Next year's workshop is scheduled April 22-24 in Jacksonville, Fla.

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-- By Mark Wingfield and Bob Allen

Baptist Women in Ministry honors female seminarians

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Baptist Women in Ministry has announced the first seven recipients of the Addie Davis Award honoring female Baptist seminary students.

The award, named in honor of the first known woman to be ordained as a Southern Baptist minister, recognizes outstanding achievement by women at Baptist seminaries, divinity schools and houses of study, according to a press release.

The award includes a financial gift and recognition at the organization's upcoming annual meeting. The luncheon meeting is scheduled at 10 a.m., June 25, at Willows Meadows Baptist Church in Houston. It will be held in conjunction with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship general assembly, scheduled June 25-27 in Houston.

Baptist Women in Ministry named the award after Addie Davis, who was ordained in a Southern Baptist church in North Carolina in 1964 but spent most of her career as a minister in the American Baptist Churches, U.S.A.

At least 1,275 Southern Baptist women have been ordained to the ministry, in addition to many others who are ordained as deacons, according to statistics compiled by Sarah Frances Anders, a sociologist at Louisiana College.

Anders said she has counted 90 women who serve as a pastor or co-pastor of a Baptist church, and another 103 who are associate pastors. Those in the largest category of ordained Baptist women -- 312 -- carry the title of "chaplain," which may include the armed forces, hospitals, industry, school or prisons.

Other women carry the title of "minister" assigned to youth, children, senior adults, music or education in Baptist churches. Other ordained women work as professors, denominational workers, missionaries, counselors, campus ministers and students, Anders said.

Despite their growing ranks, women still comprise only about 2 percent of the nearly 60,000 clergy who serve in more than 40,000 Southern Baptist congregations. The total number of pastors in the Southern Baptist Convention is more than 38,000, according to the 1997 Yearbook of American and Canadian Churches.

Recipients of the first Addie Davis Awards are Kelly Bazemore, a student at Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond; Tammy Lynn Condrey from Gardner-Webb University's school of divinity; Jennifer Dundas at Central Baptist Theological Seminary; Joy Heaton from Campbell University; Jana Stewart Kinnersley at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology; Gloria Jean Ortega of Brite Divinity School at Texas Christian University; and Rachel Stephen of Baylor University's George W. Truett Theological Seminary.

The awards are funded by an annual offering, also bearing Davis' name.

Baptist Women in Ministry, based in Kansas City, Kan., is an organization of ordained and lay women and men which encourages inclusion of women in all ministry roles.

"I am delighted that we can progress with this endeavor and offer these fine ministers a small token of financial help and our encouragement in their pursuit of God's calling in their lives," said Becca Gurney, current BWIM president and an ordained minister on staff at University Baptist Church in Austin, Texas.

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-- By Bob Allen

Ethicist urges Christians to 'get smart' about cloning

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Christians must "get smart" if they want moral objections to cloning and other reproductive techniques to be heard, a bioethicist said in a recent lecture at Baylor University.

"If you are like most Americans and you are opposed to these technologies, your reason is either you think it's unnatural or that in some way it violates the will of God," said Glenn McGee, an expert on reproductive technology who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

But in a complex society, not everyone will be persuaded by religious rhetoric, McGee argued.

"We have got to get smart about how we talk about our moral reasons for opposing certain kinds of technologies," McGee said. "What moral reason can we give, either as Christians or as members of the community, for thinking rationally about which of these technologies we will allow and which ones are nuts?"

McGee described being on a commission on cloning named by President Clinton in which participants "spent a long time arguing about whether or not cloning was playing God."

"It's a completely ridiculous line of argumentation," McGee said. "There is no way to tell."

A more important question facing Christians in the cloning debate, he said, "is what does it mean to be good stewards of reproductive technology and genetics."

McGee said the risks associated with genetic enhancements are a legitimate argument against certain reproductive technologies.

"There are dangers in calculating how your child is going to turn out," he said. "If you do engineer your child it might not make any difference because you are still sending your kid to a bad school where teachers are not paid enough."

If "enhancement" does work, he added, it could take away a child's right to determine his or her own course of life. Being able to "improve" people through genetics might also create the false impression that there can be a perfect life, he said.

"Your motives for changing your child need to be shaped by your deeper sense of what a family means, not by your commercial sense of what looks good," he said.

Another problem with new reproductive methods is trying to assess their long-term effect, he said.

For example, researchers at Texas A&M developed a new tomato which had a better skin, was more insect-resistant and produced a 50-percent larger crop than ordinary tomatoes. Researchers failed, however, to screen the tomato for a particular insect called the purple fly, which devoured the fruit, reproduced at a rate 1,000 times faster than normal and began to attack cotton crops in the same area.

"If you have an Einstein today made from gene therapy ... , you may find yourself with a child who is genetically designed to not be able to meet the challenges of the future," McGee said.

McGee, a Baylor graduate, grew up attending Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, Texas. His father, Dan McGee, is also a bioethicist who teaches on Baylor's religion faculty.

"If you are against genetic enhancement because it seems unnatural, you are in the wrong boat; get off," McGee said. "The right boat is to use ordinary parental wisdom to think about these kinds of technology so we can talk with ministers, with scientists, with politicians and on the Web in a way that we can all understand and in a way that is still meaningful."

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-- By ABP staff

Anger at God better than alternative, counselor tells Kentucky pastors

By Mark Wingfield

GEORGETOWN, Ky. (ABP) -- Being angry with God isn't nearly as dangerous as believing it's wrong to be angry with God, according to pastoral counselor Andy Lester.

Lester, professor of pastoral theology at Brite Divinity School of Texas Christian University, spoke about anger with God during an April 28 pastors' conference at Georgetown (Ky.) College.

Christians often believe it is sinful to express anger at God, Lester noted. He encouraged pastors to help their parishioners understand that anger is a natural emotion and is not in itself sinful.

This is not to imply that God is responsible for the tragedies that cause people to become angry, he said, but merely is an acknowledgment that people experience a full range of emotions in their relationship to God.

"People who believe that God is real get angry at God," he said. "If we assume intimacy with God is possible, then we must also believe anger is possible."

And, Lester asked, what kind of Supreme Being would feel threatened by a human's anger?

Yet the message is consistently sent out in churches that being angry with God is an unpardonable sin which could provoke divine retribution, he said.

"Most of our parishioners have heard that God is in control, ... life events do not happen unless God wants them to," Lester said.

Ideas such as this have bred the notion in many Christian minds that to become angry with God is to show disrespect for God's authority, to rebel against God's sovereignty, lack faith in God's plan and disregard a healthy fear of God's vengeance, he said.

Yet the Bible contains examples of humans expressing anger toward God, Lester countered. He cited numerous Psalms and Scriptures, culminating with the lament of Jesus on the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

"If God gets angry and we're created in God's image, doesn't that indicate we can be angry?"

Christians who believe it is wrong to feel angry with God should explore the theological assumptions which have built this understanding, Lester advised.

Failure to come to terms with these issues actually can create the very negative situations Christians want to avoid, he said.

For example, he said, a person during a time of trial may fear that expressing anger at God will incur separation from God. Ironically, that person actually may prompt such alienation, as unresolved anger leads to bitterness and causes the person to distance himself or herself from God.

"The very thing they are trying to prevent from happening happens," he said.

Understanding this struggle is especially important for pastors, Lester said, because they often will encounter people who actually are dealing with unresolved anger but won't admit it.

"When we are dealing with people who have dropped out of church, it is possible they are angry with God but never had identified that," Lester said.

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Kentucky CBF hires coordinator

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- John Lepper has been named the first full-time coordinator of the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, effective June 1.

Lepper, 51, has been director of family ministry for the Kentucky Baptist Convention since 1986. He also is a part-time counselor at Personal Counseling Service in Clarksville, Ind.

In his new role, Lepper will coordinate and develop the ministry of the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship, said Bob DeFoor, the organization's moderator and pastor of Harrodsburg Baptist Church.

The statewide organization, which is linked to the national Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, previously has had part-time employees. However, the organization voted earlier this year to take a new direction and seek a full-time coordinator.

DeFoor said Lepper's work will include administration, fund-raising, leading in the establishment of Fellowship churches, networking among Fellowship-minded Baptists and other tasks related to developing a Fellowship ministry within the state.

He emphasized that neither Lepper nor the Kentucky Baptist Fellowship intends to compete with the Kentucky Baptist Convention. The Fellowship movement nationwide was born out of moderate Baptists' discontent with the conservative takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention.

"We will continue to be a buffer between those who would transform the KBC into a fundamentalist organization; we will try to be between them and the KBC," DeFoor said. "But we're going to have a ministry that's more than simply a defensive posture toward the fundamentalists.

"It will not be competitive with the KBC. We'll not be doing stuff that simply duplicates what the KBC does. We intend to develop our own ministry much like an association would."

In announcing his resignation from the KBC staff, Lepper praised the KBC and said his work there has been "a labor of love."

"I have a deep appreciation for the Kentucky Baptist Convention and for Bill Mackey," the KBC's new executive secretary-treasurer. "I am committed to maintain a warm, friendly and supportive relationship with the Kentucky Baptist Convention," he said.

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