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Alabama governor wins runoff marked by religious issues

By Laurie Lattimore

MONTGOMERY, Ala. (ABP) -- In a primary runoff election heavy on religious politics and tainted by bitter attacks, Alabama Gov. Fob James emerged the victor in the state's divided Republican party.

With help from conservative Christians, James soundly defeated Montgomery businessman Winton Blount by a 14 percent margin. James' win came despite his being outspent by more than 2-1 by his opponent and strong support for Blount among urban black Democrats.

Though conservative Christians are credited with putting James over the top, he made no reference to their help in his acceptance speech. Instead the governor -- who brought in Christian Coalition mastermind and political guru Ralph Reed for the race -- focused on Alabama's "great tradition" while working in a few more jabs at his critics.

"Together we share a belief of hope and confidence, because we are heirs to a great tradition," James said. "You deserve a governor who is a decision-maker not a consensus-taker."

Bob Gambacurta, the governor's press secretary, said James has always counted on the conservative Christian voting bloc and denied accusations that James exploited religion for votes.

"The governor said from the beginning 'I will run on my record' and these constitutional [religious] issues have been part of his record," Gambacurta said, referring to the governor's involvement in two church-state separation cases coming out of Alabama during his first term. "But the governor didn't need Ralph Reed to get the conservative Christian vote. [James] has a 20-year record of that."

But D'Linell Finley, a political-science professor at The University of Alabama, argued that Reed's presence on the campaign was a deliberate maneuver to win back the state's conservative Christian vote. In the June 7 primary election, Christian voters were split between James and former Gov. Guy Hunt, Finley noted.

"Ralph Reed was indeed a good way to send a message to conservative Christian voters," said Finley, who also is pastor of Montgomery's Rock of Ages Baptist Church. "Mr. Reed is a pretty good lobbyist in his own right, but I still think it sent a strong message to any Christians wavering on how sincere Fob James was. Reed certainly helped solidify those Christians."

Following the victory, Reed noted that a James' loss would have been devastating to the "pro-family movement" nationally.

"Pro-family candidates around America took heart from Alabama's returns because they suggest that if you take a courageous stand on behalf of religious freedom and school prayer, you can not only survive, but triumph," Reed said.

James catapulted himself into Alabama's Ten Commandments debate in 1996 when Etowah County Circuit Judge Roy Moore refused to remove a replica of the Ten Commandments from his courtroom wall. James attracted national attention when he pledged to use the National Guard if necessary to protect Moore's Ten Commandments display.

Last October, U.S. District Judge Ira DeMent ruled unconstitutional an Alabama law allowing prayer at school-related events and ordered employees of a northeast Alabama school district to take classes on the separation of church and state. James' appeal of that case to the U.S. Supreme Court was rejected without comment June 22.

James' one statement aimed at conservative Christian voters came in a promise that his wife would "only have to wash out [his] mouth with soap" once a year. The pledge referred to the governor's use of foul language while signing another school-prayer bill in May. Without knowing the microphone was on, James noted the law was "not worth a [expletive]."

Although James and Blount stopped short of swearing at each other, the four-week runoff was marked by nasty campaigning. But James and the rest of his camp predicted the Republican party will be united for the general election in November.

Gambacurta said he expects religious issues to surface once again for the general election campaign. "It will be an issue because we will make it an issue," he said.

Finley said he has no doubt religion will be a major factor for the Republicans. "There is no way Fob is not going to emphasize this perceived federal attack on religious rights," Finley said. "But he will have to broaden the issue if he expects to get all of the Christian vote."

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ABP launches FaithWorks magazine

By Bob Allen

HOUSTON (ABP) -- FaithWorks, a new magazine published by Associated Baptist Press, made its debut in late June.

Plans call for the Christian lifestyle magazine to be published every other month at first and increase to monthly in 1999. It will be staffed separately from ABP's 8-year-old independent news service based in Jacksonville, Fla. The project also includes a companion web site, www.faithworks.com.

The magazine is targeted at young adults, age 25 to 45, particularly those who do not read traditional Baptist publications and who say their needs are not met by current religious periodicals.

"There is not a publication designed for young-adult lay persons in the theological mainstream," Greg Warner, ABP's executive editor told about 150 people attending a June 27 breakfast formally launching the magazine. "We feel like there is room for another voice."

In focus groups, potential readers asked for a magazine that connects their faith with other parts of their lives, such as work, home and society, Warner said. "It's our mission to help Christians integrate faith and life," he added.

Articles in the first issue include an introduction to the "Millennials," a designation for the generation born since 1978; a resurgence in the use of the arts in worship; a profile of the Christian alternative rock group Jars of Clay; and tips on how to simplify a hectic life.

Copies of the new magazine were distributed to participants at the June 25-27 General Assembly of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Houston.

"To begin a new publication in the context of the Baptist tradition at the end of the 20th century is a worthy endeavor and a historic moment," keynote speaker Bill Leonard, dean of the divinity school at Wake Forest University, said at the June 27 breakfast gathering.

Leonard, a Baptist historian, said FaithWorks -- like Baptist newspapers in the 19th century -- could make a significant contribution "to the changing Baptist landscape."

"This periodical is necessary because we need a periodical which will help us become intentional about identity," Leonard said.

"The old denominational system ... is vanishing, realigning, collapsing and in transition as we speak. Baptist people ask me not only what does it mean to be a Baptist but can you give me some positive reason to be a Baptist.

"How do we pass on Baptist identity to a new generation of young people and young families? FaithWorks has the potential to be one, perhaps even a significant, vehicle for communicating Baptist identity in a new century."

Additionally, Leonard said the magazine could enhance Baptist life by fostering "a sense of community" among Baptists and by identifying and nurturing new writers in the 21st century. "We need new writers and new outlets for their skills," Leonard said.

He said the magazine could also help "reach, discover, affirm and listen to a new generation of Baptists."

"When folks come to Baptist meetings, across the theological spectrum, they're usually over 40," Leonard said. "We cannot ignore the difficulty and necessity of attracting a new generation of folks, and we better start now."

"We're not saying it should be a new Baptist Rolling Stone, but ... ," he quipped.

Leonard said the magazine could also serve Baptists by nurturing "spirituality in a culture where pop spirituality is rampant."

"Can this magazine deal with faith and works in ways that will be instructive to the body of Christ?" he said.

Finally, Leonard said, "I hope this periodical will help us continue to struggle with the wonderful and terrifying gift of the Baptist heritage: freedom."

The freedom of individuals to interpret the Bible and churches to govern themselves are treasured hallmarks of the Baptist heritage but also have contributed to various schisms and controversies among Baptists over the years.

"FaithWorks should feel the blessed burden of freedom in its efforts to publish the word," Leonard said.

He related a story of a conversation between a journalist and a Chinese student during the 1989 uprising in Beijing's Tianamin Square.

"Freedom, that's what we want," the student said.

"What is freedom?"

"I'm not sure, but whatever it is, we need more of it."

In light of their own denominational struggles, Leonard said Baptists face a similar situation.

"Today, I'm not real sure what we Baptists mean when we say freedom," Leonard said, "but ... I think, like that student, we need more of it."

"So start this magazine and help us find our way to Christ and in so doing help us find our way to freedom," Leonard said. "Be daring, be worrisome, be scary, be compassionate, be sensitive, be audacious, be like Jesus, and freedom will find you and us along the way."

Leonard also wrote an article in the magazine's inaugural issue, a review of the Robert Duvall film "The Apostle."

Warner said the success or failure of FaithWorks now depends on funding. "We know how hard it's going to be to make this thing work," he said. "Anybody with a little money can put out a premier issue. ... Most magazines fail because of poor or inadequate marketing, which basically translates into funding."

ABP's board of directors has set goals for subscription and fund raising.

"We need to find 5,000 subscribers for this magazine over the next 18 months if we're going to earn the right to be around for another year," Warner said.

Helping families help themselves called key to ministering to families

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- Churches have a huge opportunity to influence America's families, but they'll succeed only to the degree they help families minister to themselves, religion researcher George Barna insists.

"Equip the family to minister to itself" is the first principle of how churches minister effectively to the family, Barna told two groups of Texas church leaders.

Barna explored families in his "Inward, Outward and Upward: Ministry That Transforms Lives" seminar, which he launched on a nationwide tour in Texas.

"Family is important to Americans, but it remains an enigma," said Barna, head of Barna Research Group, which surveys trends and developments in American religious life.

"When asked whom they would want to have with them if stranded on a deserted island, 66 percent said their family or spouse," he reported. But Americans' family practices contradict their professed beliefs, he added.

While more than 80 percent of married adults say they would marry the same person if they had the chance to do things differently, 60 percent of all new marriages end in divorce. And while more than 80 percent of adults say "marriage is a cherished institution," America has the highest divorce rate in the world.

"Four out of five adults describe family as one of their top three priorities in life," Barna said. "Yet we spend less time with family than we devote to television, our jobs or our hobbies."

While many U.S. families are in crisis, family still matters, he claimed. "God created the family and still cares about it. Family provides a central influence on us during our formative years. Family will be the core of the future of the church in America."

In fact, family and church are linked inextricably, Barna said.

"There is no church for the future unless we pay attention to families," he said. "Families will be the core unit of spiritual formation, because of the decentralization, fragmentation and distrust of society."

"That's scary, because very few families are prepared to be the spiritual center of anybody's life."

Churches need to "help families see themselves and their environment realistically," he said. "Help families develop creative solutions to their condition. Most can't think creatively."

Help can come in the form of nine key operating principles for family ministry, Barna suggested. If implemented, they would provide a "profound reconstruction of family ministry." They are:

-- "Equip the family to minister to itself."

"The common approach is to hire [church] staff to minister to families, but it's more effective to train laity to minister to families," he said.

Most family programs in churches "make lazy, dependent families," he observed. "It's more effective to teach families to meet their own needs."

-- "Provide clear, specific, biblical standards as your foundation" for family ministry.

"We've got to base our family ministry on the Bible, not on cultural fears," Barna stressed.

-- "Achieve impact by pursuing goals and plans for families."

About goals, Barna said, "If you don't specify it, you won't reach it, ... and fewer than 5 percent specify goals."

-- Develop a family ministry that includes all family members.

"Every member of the family must be equally esteemed," he urged. However, many churches fall short of that ideal because they focus their "family" ministry strictly on adults.

-- "Every ministry effort must reflect the uniqueness of the church and its families."

A "cookie-cutter" approach to family ministry won't work, Barna said. A church cannot import another congregation's programs and expect them to meet the needs of its families. Each church setting and each church's collection of families and family needs is specific and needs specific attention.

-- "Effective ministry to the family requires multiple approaches to family development."

"You can't do it from the pulpit," Barna warned. "People learn in different ways," so they need different avenues to learn how to make their families stronger.

Mentors or coaches -- experienced, wise individuals who are knowledgeable and trained to help families -- can make a significant impact on church families, he advised.

-- "The senior leader [usually the pastor] of the church must be an outspoken champion of families."

"This sets the tone for the ministry of the church," he said. "If the pastor is silent or minimally supportive, families will suffer."

-- "The church must pray with, for and about families -- constantly."

When the future of families is at stake, prayer matters most, Barna declared. "Prayer is the single coordinate related to the effectiveness of family ministries. That's true for marriage too."

-- "All legitimate families -- regardless of configuration -- receive the church's support."

This includes a range of situations, from couples with children still at home, to single-parent and blended households, to widowed adults living alone, he said.

Churches must heed several cautions regarding family ministry, Barna added.

First, "don't call it 'basic parenting skills,'" he urged. "No American wants to admit they're a bad parent."

Research shows parents are least-interested in family ministry when it's labeled "basic parenting skills."

Second, boomers and busters' learning styles differ, he noted.

"Busters prefer an interactive approach, don't like absolutes, are process driven and are highly relational; they like leaders who will admit mistakes," he said. Boomers, on the other hand, prefer recommendations regarding the best practices for parenting, seek efficiency and positive outcomes, and like "polished, professional" leaders.

Churches need to tailor their approaches to meet the specific needs of these families, he recommended.

Third, "women are the key to successful family ministry, but men want to be included," he said.

Fourth, although parents want family support, they are wary of accountability, Barna reported.

"They don't like evaluation and pressure. They fear being found out as failures," he said, suggesting churches offer "soft accountability" through private, helping relationships.

Fifth, families "will accept help from anyplace that seems legitimate," so the church competes for their loyalty.

"Time is of the essence," he said, urging churches to get ministries available as soon as possible, before families opt for other resources.

"The more you provide valued help, the more you'll be trusted, and the more opportunities [for effective ministry] you'll have," Barna stressed.

"How can we change the culture?" he asked. "One person at a time, and families provide the best entree."

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Researcher explores what kids, parents want out of family

By Marv Knox

OXNARD, Calif. (ABP) -- Parents and their children hold unique desires for their families, researcher George Barna reported.

Barna Research Group, which he heads, surveyed family members nationwide to determine how churches can minister most effectively. Barna presented the findings in his "Inward, Outward and Upward: Ministry That Transforms Lives" seminar, which is being held across the country.

Parents want:

-- A safety net.

"Parents need a process or group to provide support and security during crisis," he said. "Historically, this has been provided by the extended family. But not today.

"The replacement today is -- or can be -- the church. Some say the church provides it."

-- "A process for building foundations for their children's lives."

Parents are looking for ways to incorporate moral values and self-esteem in their children, he said. They're also seeking ways to help their kids handle their emotions.

-- Parenting skills.

"Most parents raise their children the same way they were raised, like it or not. They don't have a plan, a strategy for raising their kids," he said.

The skills parents say they want are better communication, the ability to make home a positive environment, conflict resolution, time management and financial management.

-- "The courage and process to make necessary lifestyle changes for the good of their families."

Problems include how to have time together as a family, how to blend family and career, and how to pay for college, Barna reported, noting: "These problems are predictable. They're also avoidable."

-- "Emotional support during times of family crisis, confusion or anxiety."

-- "A reliable adviser to help think through the issues and their philosophy."

"Fewer than 10 percent of parents articulate their values," he said. "Less than 40 percent pass along values as their parents did.

"Parents need a safe sounding board -- not lectures on how to be a parent, but interaction."

-- "A true partnership in marriage."

Children want, for themselves:

-- Unconditional love and a sense of feeling connected.

"Most children feel they have to earn their parents' love and acceptance," Barna said. "This is debilitating."

-- Better communication with their parents.

"They think their parents are too busy to get beyond superficial communication," he said. "They also think their parents are overly critical," which impedes effective communication.

-- More time with their parents.

Mothers spend less than two hours in "meaningful interaction" with their children each week, and fathers spend less than an hour, Barna's research shows.

-- More trust and freedom from their parents.

They want to be "respected for who they are," Barna said. They already have more material things than previous generations, partly because both parents typically work, but they really want respect.

-- A "deeper sense of purpose in life."

-- Greater acceptance of their friends by their parents.

"Today's kids are abundantly relational," he observed. "So, they take rejection of their friends personally."

For their families, they desire:

-- Greater emotional closeness.

"They're seeking unity, understanding and security," Barna said. "They want a family they can be proud of."

-- Deeper respect and tolerance between their parents.

"Most kids today fear their parents will divorce," he said.

-- Less financial stress.

Children indicated they wish their families had less debt and more savings.

-- Physical safety.

Children express a high degree of concern about crime.