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

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Promise Keepers to turn to smaller venues, president says

By Mark Wingfield

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP) -- The days when regional Promise Keepers events fill massive stadiums may be over, the organization's president told reporters July 25 as more than 50,000 men gathered in the RCA Dome in Indianapolis.

"The days of Promise Keepers having a general invitation of opening stadiums are over," said Randy Phillips, a former pastor who serves as administrative head of Promise Keepers operations in Denver. "We've fulfilled that aspect of God's grace."

Beginning in 1999, Promise Keepers will move beyond hosting massive regional rallies to working in partnership with local groups to support smaller citywide events, he said. The difference could mean filling basketball arenas or civic auditoriums rather than 60,000-seat stadiums.

Although a new concept for Promise Keepers, which burst into national headlines in 1991 by attracting tens of thousands of men to its stadium events, the concept is not new in religious circles, Phillips said. Actually, it's similar to what the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association has been doing for decades.

In the future, he said, Promise Keepers will respond to invitations from local leaders who have the desire and resources to organize a local Promise Keepers rally. Up until now, Promise Keepers events have been scheduled on a national basis, with local support networks enlisted after the fact.

The new approach means Promise Keepers is becoming more focused on serving local churches and on building local leadership, Phillips said.

Promise Keepers leaders knew from the beginning that massive stadium rallies would be only one phase in a larger movement, he said.

Promise Keepers reached its peak of big-draw events last October by staging a "Stand in the Gap" rally in Washington. That event, estimated to have drawn more than 1 million men from across the nation, is believed to be the largest rally ever held on the National Mall.

At the same time, however, Promise Keepers was facing dwindling attendance at its regional rallies, where participants paid about \$60 apiece to attend. Founder Bill McCartney announced during the Washington rally that future Promise Keepers events would be free.

That proved to be a controversial decision, forcing the organization to temporarily lay off several hundred paid staff members earlier this year until donations caught up to the level of income previously generated by attendance fees.

Phillips said July 25 that the decision to drop the attendance fees was justified, even though it created bumps along the road. "Our decision was never based upon numbers," he said, explaining that registration fees previously accounted for 70 percent of the organization's budgeted income.

Dropping the fee was not intended to entice more men to return to the rallies -- nearly three-fourths said they would come again regardless of the fee -- but was intended to encourage those men to bring friends with them, Phillips said.

That description is borne out by results of an on-line survey at the Promise Keepers website in October 1997. When asked what difference it would make in their attendance at future events, less than 20 percent of the 10,000 respondents said it would make much difference personally. But a majority, more than 65 percent, said it would make a difference in whether they brought someone else with them.

The validity of that survey result has been demonstrated in this year's stadium rallies, where overall attendance has been down, but the number of first-time participants is up, said Steve Chavis, Promise Keepers spokesman. And the number of men making first-time commitments of faith to Jesus Christ at Promise Keepers events has been strong.

During the opening night altar call at the Indianapolis rally, more than 800 men crowded around the end zone where the Indianapolis Colts normally score touchdowns to declare spiritual victories of their own. Most of these men were making public decisions to become Christians.

Attendance at the Indianapolis event was estimated at between 50,000 and 60,000; no turnstile count was taken. Pre-registration was 63,000. It was the largest attendance at a Promise Keepers event this year, drawing perhaps 20,000 more men than the next-largest rallies in Detroit, Los Angeles and Philadelphia.

Chavis and Phillips said Indianapolis always has been a strong location for Promise Keepers, perhaps because of its location at the crossroads of several major interstate highways or perhaps because of the strong religious influence in the Midwest.

Nationally, this year's rallies have drawn a slightly younger crowd than before, Chavis said, with the average age dropping from 45 to 35. Also, the average household income of men attending Promise Keepers events has dropped from the low \$40,000 range to the mid \$30,000 range, he said.

Baptists continue to account for the largest single denominational home of Promise Keepers participants, Chavis said, although the non-denominational ministry attracts men from all religious backgrounds.

The next major event Promise Keepers is planning relates to the turn of the century. Vision 2000 is an effort to bring together men, women and children at specific sites in all 50 states for a combined celebration of faith via satellite video and audio connections.

During the Indianapolis rally, Phillips encouraged men to commit to be part of such events in their own states, to bring their wives, sons and daughters and to begin enlisting friends to attend as well.

The theme of the 1998 Promise Keepers rallies is "Live A Legacy," encouraging men to make a difference through personal devotion to Christ, love for their wives and children, debt-free living, being a witness in the workplace and fostering racial and denominational reconciliation.

"The legacy you leave in your home doesn't have to continue a pattern that's wrong, that's sinful," Christian recording artist Wayne Watson told the men in Indianapolis. "There are some things your dad did that were consciously wrong."

He encouraged men to forgive their own fathers for sins of not paying attention to their children and not demonstrating love toward their wives.

The night before, speaker Steve Farrar of Men's Leadership Ministries in Bryan, Texas, told the men: "You can establish a new link in your family chain."

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Value of Promise Keepers lies in 'one' changed man, leader says

By Mark Wingfield

INDIANAPOLIS (ABP) -- While Promise Keepers draws men from many faith backgrounds, races and socio-economic levels, its greatest impact has been felt by men who struggle with family relations or who are not Christians.

When asked to describe the type of person most helped by Promise Keepers, Randy Phillips, the organization's president, tells this story.

During the "Stand in the Gap" Promise Keepers rally on the National Mall in Washington last year, a Promise Keepers staff member was roaming the crowd praying and sharing with various small groups of men. In one of these groups, he met a man who for now will be called Steve.

As the group of five or six men prayed together at midday, one of them turned to Steve and said, "It's time, isn't it, Steve?" Then he and several others began reciting Scripture verses to Steve, apparently in an attempt to reassure him about something they had been talking about before.

Before the Promise Keepers staffer knew what was happening, Steve was on his knees, praying to commit his life to Jesus Christ. Tears flowed, and hugs followed.

The staffer hung around a little longer as the program progressed. After some time had passed, one of the men again turned to Steve: "It's time, isn't it, Steve?"

Steve responded positively, and another man handed Steve a cellular telephone. Steve dialed a number, and the Promise Keepers staff member heard this end of the conversation: "Hi, honey. I'm calling to tell you that I've just made the two most important decisions of my life. First, I've just prayed and given my life to Christ. God has answered your prayer. And second, I'm calling to say that I'm sorry for all the things I've done and said and to ask you if you would be willing to give me a second chance. If you'll have me back, I promise I'll be the kind of husband you ought to have. And if the children will have me back, I promise I'll be the kind of father they've never had."

Phillips then drew his point from telling this story: "That's why we exist: that one changed guy."

Promise Keepers, he said, is not so much about what happens from the platform at rallies but what happens when Christian men draw strength from each other and work together to show love to their non-Christian friends.

That's why Promise Keepers has found appeal with a wide range of men, "from guys who just got out of prison two hours ago to missionary kids," he said.

A Baptist pastor who recently attended his second Promise Keepers event said he's seen a similar impact in his local church.

"This is a good organization," said Jay Robison, pastor of First Baptist Church of Paris, Ky. He was among a small group of men from Paris, organized by a layperson, who attended the July 25 rally in Indianapolis.

As a pastor, Robison said, he likes Promise Keepers because it encourages fellowship across denominational and racial lines, offers support to the local church and allows men to share common experiences.

Men from his church who attended previous Promise Keepers events came back full of contagious enthusiasm, he said.

And his men have drawn strength from being thrown together in an environment where they can be freed of their normal reservations about expressing emotions, Robison said. "There are guys I came with who hugged me that have never hugged me before. ... Being here freed them ... and will cause them to think more positively about their commitments to family and church in the future."

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Worldwide Baptist youth gathering challenged to deeper walk with Christ

By Wendy Ryan

HOUSTON (ABP) -- Hundreds of young people from around the world came forward in response to an invitation by American youth leader Louie Giglio to move into a deeper experience with God during the closing session of the July 22-26 Baptist Youth World Conference in Houston.

Giglio director of CHOICE Resources, a college-g geared ministry based in Atlanta, urged youth to "get out of three-inch-water experience and into the river of God that flows for surrender, healing and to eternity."

Giglio called on young people to pray for God's power to minister to a needy world. "We are filled with great plans but so little power," he said, urging participants to pray "until God hears the desperate cry of his people and sends his river of healing and revival to the world."

To those from around the world that came from places of injustice, oppression or civil war, Giglio said, "God's message to you today is that Jesus is taking you to a place that lasts forever."

Sponsored by the Youth Department of the Baptist World Alliance, the youth conference is held every five years on a different continent. Participants from Cuba, Zambia, Uganda, and many other countries shared stories of young people who made tremendous sacrifices to have a chance to meet and worship with fellow Baptists from around the world.

More than 8,000 young people from 81 countries attended the five-day conference.

In addition to hearing speakers, the crowd also saw gospel messages dramatized by The Company, a drama group from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Youth responded enthusiastically to lively music including a concert by Shawn McClemore, worship and praise led by Texas-based Soul's Desire, Jamaican reggae worship dancers and choirs from Norway, Zambia and the Philippines.

Other speakers included Leena Lavanya of India, who described her ministries to prisoners, lepers and victims of AIDS, and Svetlana Vorobyeva from Moscow, who described continuing persecution of minority Christians in her country.

Chamunowra Chiromo, pastor of Emmanuel Baptist Church in Harare, Zimbabwe, encouraged the youth to fight injustice and oppression out of a heart of love. "Our actions of saving the world as Christians are to spring from a heart of love" he said.

Preaching in English and Spanish, Yamina Apolonaris-Concepcion, executive minister of the Baptist Churches of Puerto Rico, told the youth to do as Jesus did when he touched and healed the leper and place themselves where they are needed the most. "God is calling you and me to enter the territory of the leper world, so that people can see the loving, transforming power of Christ," she said.

Workshops and Bible studies spoke to practical Christian needs and brought young people into closer contact with others from around the world.

After meeting a pastor from Indonesia, Maria Demeshkina from Moscow said: "He made me aware of how ignorant I was about things going on around the world. I felt very convicted when he said that it is great that Christians in other countries have the freedom to worship God, but they also have the responsibility to share the burden and pray for those who do not."

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Senate unlikely to act on religious persecution abroad

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Unable to rally the support of key Republican lawmakers, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee pushed aside a bill designed to punish countries that permit or endorse religious persecution.

The International Religious Freedom Act, sponsored by Sen. Don Nickles, R-Okla., was on a list of bills to be considered and voted upon in committee July 23. But it was removed from the markup session after it failed to receive the support of enough GOP panelists to clear the committee, according to a committee official.

Nickles was prepared to make several changes to the measure, but apparently those changes were not enough to persuade Democrats and at least three GOP panel members to support the legislation.

Another religious persecution bill, sponsored by Sen. Arlen Specter, R-Pa., and Rep. Frank Wolf, R-Va., has passed the House but will not pass the Senate in its current form, according to a Senate source.

Observers say lack of support for the Nickles bill leaves few options for Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott, R-Miss., who has promised a floor vote on some religious-persecution bill before the August recess.

The Senate could attach a modified version of one of the bills to the Foreign Operations Appropriations bill being considered before the recess or allow amendments to the Wolf-Specter bill, which is sitting at the Senate desk, said Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom.

A sticking point in the debate is the use of sanctions to punish nations that participate in or allow religious persecution. Supporters say sanctions are necessary for the United States to get tough against religious persecution. Opponents say sanctions could unintentionally backfire by causing foreign governments to crack down even harder on religious minorities.

Specter and Wolf's Freedom from Religious Persecution Act (H.R. 2431) would create an officer who could automatically impose economic penalties against countries which engage in persecution.

The Nickles bill would also mandate sanctions but would allow more flexibility by allowing the president to choose from a list penalties to impose.

Religious groups are split over the measures. The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission supported the Wolf-Specter bill and is generally supportive of the Nickles bill. The Baptist Joint Committee and the National Council of the Churches opposed the Wolf-Specter bill and are seeking further changes in the Nickles bill.

The Clinton administration is opposed to both bills.

James Dunn, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee, said the debate over legislation to curb religious persecution in other nations has increased awareness of the issue and been a "learning experience for both the well-intentioned champions of human rights and those whose involvement was driven by domestic politics."

"We also know better than before that although there is a universal agreement that the United States should affirm religious freedom around the world, it is much more difficult to know how to craft legislation to achieve it," Dunn said.

Theology, public policy center appoints new interim director

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Churches' Center for Theology and Public Policy, an ecumenical research center on justice, peace, and the environment, recently elected Barbara Green as its interim director.

Green, a Presbyterian minister, served for 15 years in that denomination's Washington office, working on peace and international issues.

She is a graduate of Yale Divinity School and received a two-year upper graduate degree at the University of Heidelberg in Germany.

"I am particularly delighted to be moving into such a strong academic context to continue to pursue connections between faith and public issues," Green said.

There "is a lot of diversity and polarization around what it means to incorporate faith and public policy issues in our country right now," Green said. "The center may be helpful in providing a context for dialogue among those diverse perspectives."

Green said the interim post will last for two years while the center's directors evaluate priorities. She takes over Sept. 1, succeeding James Nash, the center's director for the last 10 years, who has resigned to resume his research and writing in Boston.

A 1975 planning committee of seminary faculty and church leaders established the center and elected a board of directors in 1976. According to the center, its primary areas of concern have been peacemaking and disarmament, urban policy, economic justice and taxation, racial-ethnic and women's rights, poverty and hunger, and ecological integrity.

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-- By Kenny Byrd

Peacemaker Ministries focuses on reconciliation, not adjudication

By Laurie Lattimore

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Glen Waddell's ultimate goal with his latest business venture is to work himself out of a job. As an attorney working in Christian conciliation, Waddell would like to eventually be a lawyer without any clients. Unfortunately, he said, his job is secure.

"Society has a live and let live attitude, and that has infiltrated the church," said Waddell, a Birmingham, Ala., lawyer who is heading up the first regional office of Peacemaker Ministries. Based in Billings, Mont., the organization aims to resolve conflicts between Christians and reconcile believers before they end up in court.

"In the long-term, I would like to put myself out of a job," Waddell said.

In the short-term, however, he has a dual charge -- reconciling Christians in disputes related to business, family, church and employment; while training other Christians to be conciliators as well.

"We want a network of trained conciliators," he said.

A three-phase training program encourages nonlawyers to become advisers for fellow Christians involved in disputes. In fact, Christians in nonlaw professions -- such as doctors, builders and counselors -- can bring much-needed expertise to specific legal disagreements, Waddell explained.

Waddell, a Presbyterian, said there are more opportunities for conciliation than resources right now -- a ratio he hopes to change.

"Courts are overloaded because churches and families are falling down on their responsibilities," said Waddell, an attorney with a Birmingham law firm eight years before heading up the Peacemakers office that opened June 1. "Christians are less and less able to handle conflicts biblically."

The regional office -- Peacemaker Ministries' first -- became a reality through the support of the Wallace, Jordan, Ratliff and Brandt firm in Birmingham. Birch Bowdre, an attorney at the firm and board member for Peacemaker Ministries, was instrumental in gaining support within the firm for the idea.

Thomas Eden, another attorney at the firm and a member of Shades Mountain Baptist Church in Birmingham, was on board with the concept from the beginning. "We all have rights and we all want to have our day in court, but I haven't seen any movement in churches to chastise members for suing other Christians," Eden said. "The legal system is not created to do reconciliation; it is created to resolve disputes without warfare. Peacemakers has a better way."

Starting with \$60,000 to open the regional office, Waddell is predicting the annual budget will be about \$170,000. Between 30 and 50 percent of the ministry is self-supporting, and the rest is made up through donations.

The process is simple. Christians in dispute go to Peacemakers, either separately or together. Waddell or other trained conciliators coach each person or group through the Peacemaker strategy, analyzing the disagreement. Through reading Scripture, admitting their own faults and confronting others about theirs, the parties pursue reconciliation in lieu of legal action.

Mediation or arbitration is used in many cases, Waddell, but the outcome is still reconciliation between parties. In rare cases, he said, the proper channel is to go to court.

"There are times when litigation is appropriate," Waddell said, such as preserving assets. "But as Christians, that should be our last resort."

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Peacemaker concept 'radical,' conciliation leader says

By Laurie Lattimore

BILLINGS, Mont. (ABP) -- It's a typical scenario. A tenant refuses to pay out his lease because he believes the landlord did not fulfill contract obligations. The landlord argues the tenant signed an agreement and therefore must pay.

In most cases, the obvious solution is to take the matter to court. But what if the landlord and tenant are members of the same church -- or Christians who attend different local congregations? Should there be a different standard for Christians when it comes to settling legal disputes?

Ken Sande believes so. As executive director of Peacemaker Ministries, Sande conciliates business, family, employment and church disputes, helping Christians to resolve conflict outside the courtroom.

"When I first began to practice law, I was excited about the prospect of helping people solve problems," said Sande. But the court system is designed to settle legal issues, not reconcile people, he noted. "In fact, lawsuits often drive people further apart and often ingrain the beliefs that lead to controversy."

The concept of Christian conciliation originated in 1977 with the Christian Legal Society when several attorneys explored how to apply biblical principles to legal conflicts. CLS started forming Christian conciliation services across the country, developing a network of organizations interested in the concept.

One of those groups was Sande's Christian Conciliation Service of Montana, based in Billings. Realizing a need for education about proper conflict resolution, Sande organized the Institute for Christian Conciliation in 1982.

CLS decided in 1986 to establish the Association of Christian Conciliation Services, since the idea had burgeoned beyond original expectations. Sande was elected president of the association in 1988.

Sande merged ACCS and his institute in 1993 under the umbrella name, Peacemaker Ministries, taken from the book he wrote in 1991 introducing the idea of reconciliation. Now the Institute for Christian Conciliation is one of three divisions at Peacemakers, along with Partners in Peacemaking and Young Peacemakers -- two divisions that focus on educating and training Christians in conciliation.

Sande is particularly excited about Young Peacemakers, material adapted from the original Peacemakers a few years ago and written by Sande's wife. "We're on a slippery slope with our kids," Sande said, noting that youth today are solving their problems through "suicide or shooting mom and dad. We need to get serious about giving our kids the ability to handle conflict."

Peacemaker Ministries also opened its first regional office June 1 in Birmingham, Ala. Headed by Glen Waddell, an environmental engineer-turned-attorney, the Birmingham Peacemakers office services the entire Southeast. Sande said the ideal would be to open regional offices around the country, but he added that the idea of conciliation has been slow to catch on.

"This is a pretty radical concept," he admitted, adding that his father, an appellate judge, used to laugh at the idea of conciliation. Sande's father eventually became a Christian partly through the success of Peacemakers in handling societal conflicts.

He compared conflict resolution to going to the dentist for most people -- "you only do it when you have to."

Sande added that it has been a challenge to convince churches of the peacemaker concept. "Especially in the church conflict should be handled in a different way than it is in the rest of society," Sande said. "The fact of the matter is that usually we can't tell the difference."

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