

# Associated Baptist Press

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

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## Stories of reconciliation shared at Louisville conference

By Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- The reconciling power of the gospel is stronger than barriers of race, class, gender, religion or nationality, said numerous speakers at the second Reconciliation Networks of Our World conference in Louisville, Ky.

St. Matthews Baptist Church and St. Paul Missionary Baptist Church were co-hosts of the Nov. 4-7 international, interdenominational conference, which included a large contingent of Southern Baptists.

Reconciliation NOW is a global grassroots network which formed last year in Coventry, England, to share stories of hope and restoration among Christians. The four-day conference featured plenary sessions led by participants from every continent, as well as workshops, forums, worship and daily theological "reflection groups."

Dozens of speakers shared their testimonies of reconciliation in Europe, Australia, Asia, Africa, North America and South America and the Caribbean.

In the conference's opening session, Antoine Rutayisirie from Rwanda described how he overcame hatred of enemies despite genocide.

A minority Tutsi, Rutayisirie said he grew up hating Hutus, whom he blamed for the murder of his father and for attempts on his own life. He was at the point of renouncing Christianity, he said, before God answered his prayers to remove "all the anger and bitterness" from his heart.

Years later, during the 1994 genocide, as factions clashed outside his home and he and his family thought they were about to die, he said he considered taking up arms and joining the fight.

"I said, 'What is the use of it? You've been preaching and telling people you can love your enemies,'" he said. "Then the sentence that changed my life came back into my life: Father forgive them, for they don't know what they are doing."

Other speakers told similarly dramatic tales of reconciliation amid conflict in hot spots such as South Africa and Northern Ireland and of overcoming barriers including injustice against Australian Aborigines and between whites and blacks in the United States.

In a closing session which focused on "Healing America's Wounds," Promise Keepers founder Bill McCartney and his wife, Lyndi, described reconciliation that occurred in their marriage.

Conference co-director Reid Hardin said an estimated 650 people attended part or all of the conference. That is about 250 more than last year. Hardin predicted the third meeting, scheduled Oct. 28-30, 2000, in Boston, will draw an even larger crowd.

The first Reconciliation NOW gathering was last September at the historic cathedral in Coventry, England, which was bombed by Nazis during World War II.

After the air raid, people from the congregation built a cross from wood and nails pulled from the wreckage. Not knowing who would win the war, they began to pray: "Lord, may one day we become friends with the people who made these bombs," said Leslie Hollon, pastor of Louisville's St. Matthews Baptist Church.

Since the cathedral was rebuilt in the 1960s, it has become "a tremendous symbol of death, burial and resurrection" and a center for various groups interested in reconciliation around the world, said Hardin, who retired last year as lay-renewal leader for the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board.

Hardin said he used the Coventry story with lay-renewal groups across the country during a 24-year career with the agency. He first visited there in 1987, and stood at the "altar of reconciliation," one of several powerful symbols in the cathedral, which describes Coventry as a network of global reconciliation.

"It hit me like a bomb," Hardin said. "God called Southern Baptists to be a network of global reconciliation."

Troubled by a then-brewing controversy between moderates and conservatives in his own denomination, Hardin went to Coventry's "Cross of Nails" missions organization and asked for prayer for Southern Baptists.

Hardin and others planned to hold an annual meeting for Southern Baptist lay-renewal leaders in Coventry one year. In that setting, the theme of the meeting turned to reconciliation, and at Coventry's suggestion, it was opened to other groups.

The movement "is grassroots and it is story driven," said Larry Martin, chairman of a local task force which put the Louisville meeting together.

As a small group of Southern Baptist lay-renewal leaders became interested in the issue over the last decade, "we realized that God was developing trends of reconciliation around the world, and what he wanted us to do was provide a platform for people to tell their stories of reconciliation," said Martin, director of missions and evangelism for the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

"We don't see this as having a program agenda," Hardin said. "Our purpose is to bring these networks together to try and see what resources are already out there."

The program included both high-profile Christian leaders and ordinary pastors and lay people, Hardin said, but did not feature any as headline speakers.

Last year's meeting was clouded by a minor controversy, when trustees of NAMB prohibited 13 employees from attending because it included other faiths.

Criticism that having fellowship with people from other denominations forces participants to compromise their beliefs misses the point, Hardin said. "We're talking about reconciliation," he said. "We're talking about letting things slide."

For example, one speaker at this year's conference offended some Catholics, Hardin said. In discussing the matter with Catholics, "I was telling them this is what it's all about," he said. "The victim can initiate reconciliation."

Hardin said the reconciliation movement has not yet attracted large numbers of Southern Baptists. "We're trying to make quiet inroads," he said, by focusing on a few key leaders in various networks in the denominational structure.

"We view ourselves as a catalytic group, not a comprehensive group," he said. "We are the opposite of Promise Keepers."

One major goal is to continue to identify other groups that are working in reconciliation ministries and create opportunities to hear their stories, Hardin said. "We're learning that we're just touching the hem of the garment."

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-- Leslie Scanlon contributed to this story.

## **South Africa addressing problems with grace, forgiveness, speaker says**

By David Winfrey and Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Simply establishing just laws will not guarantee a just society, a member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission told an international conference on Christian reconciliation.

Peter Storey, former bishop of South Africa's Methodist Church, said the commission succeeded only because it was devised and implemented by people of faith who understood grace and forgiveness.

Storey was one of dozens of speakers who shared stories of Christians overcoming barriers of race, politics and religion at the Nov. 4-7 Reconciliation Networks of Our World conference in Louisville, Ky.

As the South African government's system of apartheid was coming to an end, some leaders began to consider how the country should deal with its violent past. Rather than simply burying the problems or seeking to punish all wrongdoers, South Africa's minister of justice asked church leaders, counselors, human-rights lawyers and others to construct a system of amnesty to allow the nation time to heal from its wounds, Storey said.

"If the truth commission had been presided over by politicians, I would have no story to tell you tonight," Storey said. "It is because there was the wisdom to turn to people who had moral and spiritual stature and integrity and who understood the way in which the healing spirit of God works. That is why I have a story tell you."

Storey said the Truth and Reconciliation Commission brought healing by giving priority to hearing from the victims of injustice and offering amnesty to about 8,000 people meeting strict criteria who had been involved in government oppression.

"It is the first time in history that a nation through its parliament has taken the principles of confession and forgiveness and tried to let them happen in the healing of its own history," Storey said. "What would have happened if that process had been followed after the civil war in this country?" he asked.

Storey challenged Christians in America to become agents of reconciliation amid divisions of race and class. "It must begin with the people who claim to know sins forgiven and new life begun," he said. "If we who call ourselves the forgiven people are not able to leader this nation to the healing of its own pain and its own wounds, who will?"

Reconciliation NOW is a global grassroots network which formed last year in Coventry, England, to share stories of hope and restoration among Christians. The four-day conference featured plenary sessions led by participants from every continent, as well as workshops, forums, worship and daily theological "reflection groups."

Dozens of speakers shared their testimonies of reconciliation in Europe, Australia, Asia, Africa, North America and South America and the Caribbean.

During a session on Europe, Harvey Thomas, who worked in the cabinet of former British Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, described the hatred he felt for leaders of the Irish Republican Army after he was blown through the roof in a hotel bombing which killed five of his friends 14 years ago. Recently, Thomas said, God led him to

write letters of reconciliation to three top leaders of the IRA. David Porter, a Presbyterian from Northern Ireland who directs a ministry involved in peacemaking efforts in the country, joined Thomas at the platform and led a prayer.

John Dawson, an international expert on Christian reconciliation and author of the book *Healing America's Wounds*, said he believes prayer and confession within the Christian community averted a bloodbath in Indonesia in May.

Dawson told of praying with Christian leaders in Jakarta amid rioting in days prior to the resignation of President Suharto. Church leaders from Indonesia's 27 provinces met for three days to confess sins of hurting one another and to pray.

"It was within eight hours of this season of confession that the dictator meekly stepped down," Dawson said.

While many problems remain in Indonesia, Dawson said, "I believe God's people having stepped into the gap in the ministry of reconciliation" had a miraculous effect. "God alone can do something like that," he said. "Unbelievable."

Rudy Puhl of Ottawa, Canada, told of growing up as an English-speaking Canadian filled with "hate and anger" for French-speaking Quebec stemming from an incident when a grown man punched him in the face when he was 11 years old.

In 1991, he became fast friends with a French-speaking Canadian Christian at a March for Jesus. The two eventually started a church and have written three books together. Puhl said he has been in the "personal reconciliation and transformation ministry" the last four years.

Raleigh Washington, vice president for reconciliation for Promise Keepers, said it is important for blacks and whites in America to build a relationship with a person of the other race.

"We've got to take responsibility," said Washington, an African American. "We've got to forgive and let go. We've got to put love into action."

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## **Rwandan tells conference he gave up 'right to hate'**

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- A Rwandan once consumed by bitterness for the ethnic group that killed his father said he realized healing would only come when he gave up his "right to hate."

Dressed in a bright blue-and-black African shirt, Antoine Rutayisirie gave his testimony at the opening session of the Nov. 4-7 Reconciliation Networks of the World Conference in Louisville, Ky.

Rutayisirie, a member of the Tutsi ethnic group, described growing up hating the Hutus, who make up 85 percent of the nation's population, because they killed his father when Rutayisirie was only 5 years old.

The unrest was rooted in the overthrow of a Tutsi king in 1959. That led to years of social unrest and changes in the nation's ruling powers, he said.

Later the Hutus aimed another wave of killings at Tutsi students, leading him to proclaim, "They killed my father and now they're trying to kill me."

Rutayisirie said he found another reason for hating the Hutus later, when he was removed from a university position. The move was supposedly to achieve ethnic balance in the staff, but the school had only a handful of Tutsi teachers.

Forced to teach at a country school, Rutayisirie was so angry over this treatment that his students nicknamed him "Question Mark" because nobody could understand him.

Rutayisirie was raised a Catholic and said he considered himself a Christian, but eventually he began to doubt his faith. He decided to read the entire Bible three times during a six-month period in 1984 as a last-ditch effort before deciding whether God is real.

After this exercise, he decided to live according to the Scriptures, he said. But as he studied the Bible he kept stumbling over passages about loving one's enemies.

"Giving away my right to hate my enemies?" he said. "I couldn't accept it. To me, it was impossible. I said, 'Either I'm going to be a child of God or hate the Hutus.'"

To resolve this confusion, Rutayisirie took a day off work to meditate and write the names of every person he hated and reasons why he hated each one.

He said he then prayed, asking God to give him the power to forgive. Every time he gave up hatred for a person, he wept.

Afterward, he asked God to help him bless each of his enemies. The effect on him was so noticeable that no one used his old nickname any more.

"My whole character changed," he said. "All the anger and bitterness was gone. Six years later, war started again; I had a rough time. But I saw the love of God. I went back to 1984 and said, 'Lord, I'm going to love these people.'"

When a vicious civil war erupted in 1994, Rutayisirie found his life hanging in the balance. Soldiers blocked off roads and went from house to house, killing Tutsis.

He said that as he wondered whether he would survive, a voice inside argued he should go out, "fight like a man" and defend himself and his family. Instead, he remembered the Bible verse which quotes Jesus praying on the cross, "Father, forgive them for they know not what they do."

"I said, 'Lord, help me die like you died. Help me speak to them, pray for them and then die.'"

Not only was he filled with peace, the group intent on killing him was turned away.

When living between opposing forces, each tries to pull you into their camp and get you to hate, he said. He is thankful he's been able to resist.

"I pray, and the Lord helps me," Rutayisirie said. "I praise the Lord because Jesus has been my Savior and he takes all the pain."

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## **Speaker outlines principles, ingredients of reconciliation**

By Joyce Sweeney Martin

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Reconciliation is not an event that happens all at once; it's a difficult, often painful journey, said Peter Storey, former Methodist bishop in South Africa.

Storey, a member of South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, presented five principles and five ingredients of the process of reconciliation at the Nov. 4-7 Reconciliation NOW conference in Louisville, Ky.

The five principles, Storey said, are:

-- Acknowledge the permanency of those you are divided from. "The person you least want to spend the rest of your life with is always going to be there, so you may as well get on with the job of learning how to live with them now," Storey said.

In South Africa, Storey said, he "had to reckon with the fact that those who had done all this evil in our land would not go away. ... Perhaps one of the most prophetic things [President Nelson] Mandela ever did was to recognize with supreme wisdom that the opponent does not vanish just because you have won the victory, and the next task is to make the opponent your friend."

-- Recognize your enemies are not the only enemy; there is another enemy within. "I cannot reconcile with the people who have done great wrong until, my friends, I recognize that I too am capable of doing everything that they have done," he said.

"There's very little point of talking reconciliation with your friends. The only people where it's relevant are those who have been your enemies."

-- Get biblical about evil. "Paul says ... wake up to the fact that we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, against human beings. ... We wrestle against the forces which drive their lives ... fear, hate, prejudice which push their lives into doing terrible and hateful things."

But people must not demonize individuals, Storey said.

"Don't confuse the evil we fight against with the people ... who themselves become prisoners of that evil," he said. "We need always to make space for the fact that God can change individuals."

-- Understand how people change. "I believe true change happens in our lives only when we discover how greatly we've already been forgiven," he said. "And it is only when we've discovered how greatly we've been loved. Isn't that the truth of the Christian gospel, when I see how much God loved me that he gave his only Son? That is when my heart is broken and I turn to God for salvation and forgiveness. Therefore, if you are going to be in the reconciliation business, you go out there with a forgiving spirit, and it is not easy. I warn you now."

-- Always hold reconciliation and justice together. "It's very difficult to reconcile with your foot on my neck," Storey said. "The cost of reconciliation is a new lifestyle, a new way of living toward our sisters and brothers."

The five ingredients to reconciliation, he said, are:

-- There must be a prime mover. "Somebody must take the first step. Now we know who it should be, surely it should be the person or the group that have done the wronging. But the really great moments in history ... are the moments when it's the people who have been wronged who amazingly, with grace which is amazing grace, have taken the first step." Jesus, Storey said, provides the ultimate example.

-- The parties must engage. "You cannot reconcile at a distance," Storey said.

-- The truth must be told. "History is always written by the conquerors. ... You cannot build reconciliation on one perspective of history. You have to work together to find a common story, even if it is not a happy story of what we did to each other."

-- Repentance must be genuine. "Unless I believe you are genuinely sorry, I'm not sure we can reconcile. Unless I am genuinely sorry, you will never be sure whether you can reconcile with me."

-- Reconcilers must be ready to die. Those on the journey of reconciliation should recognize that the ultimate model of reconciliation, Jesus, paid with the ultimate price, Storey said.

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## **Promise Keepers executive outlines reconciliation principles**

By Ken Walker

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- God's controlling love is at the basis of Christian reconciliation attempts, according to a vice president for Promise Keepers.

African-American pastor Raleigh Washington said the ideals for reconciliation are found in 2 Corinthians 5:14-20, which states Christ's love compels Christians to no longer regard others from a worldly view.

"Reconciliation is driven by the controlling love of Christ," Washington told a workshop audience at the recent Reconciliation NOW conference in Louisville, Ky.

"We have to have a Christ-centered attitude. We can't be controlled by the world," he said.

Reconciliation is the first assignment of every Christian, Washington said. This involves reaching out to others to bring them to God, while not holding their trespasses against them, he explained.

Washington, a Chicago pastor, reviewed eight biblical principles of reconciliation, taken from his book, "Breaking Down Walls." They include:

-- The call of every Christian to the task. Referring to the Tower of Babel, Washington said God recognized people united in voice and purpose have enormous power. He said Christians should unite in Christ so the glory goes to God.

-- Commitment to relationships. Such relationships should be like a godly marriage, he said, in which conflict is inevitable, but divorce is not an option.

-- Intentionality. This involves purposeful, positive and planned activity that is intended to reconcile people. This is complex, he said, requiring that people not withdraw the first time they get offended.

-- Sincerity. Christians should be willing to be vulnerable by disclosing thoughts and feelings, he said. Whites and blacks too often talk to members of their own race about the other group but not across those lines, Washington said.

-- Sensitivity. This means gaining knowledge to relate to those of differing backgrounds. Three key words are, "Help me understand," he said.

Washington told about an American Indian girl who lived in their home for six months. By saying, "Help me understand," he discovered she didn't want to be identified as "Indian" or "Native American" but as a member of her Sioux tribe.

-- Sacrifice. Christians must be willing to choose a lower position over a higher one to achieve reconciliation. One's opinion is the highest position of power each person holds, he added.

-- Interdependence. Christians should recognize that each culture adds something of value to society, he said.

-- Empowerment. Repentance and forgiveness must be real to relieve tension, Washington said: "If there's not repentance and real forgiveness, there's still tension in the relationship. We don't talk and we miss out on a powerful thing called the miracle of dialogue."

At his church, a mix of 65 percent African-American members, 30 percent white members and 5 percent people from other backgrounds, Washington said he uses these principles to resolve conflict.

Quarterly, each group meets to discuss their views of church business; then he calls them together to explore the feelings that have been expressed.

"If you wait until there's a problem, it's too late," he said. "One essential thing in crossing barriers is we have to laugh about diversity. We have to laugh and talk about it so we can get to the scars. They're there, but as agents of reconciliation we can overcome that."

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## **Professor advocates 'kingdom' churches**

By Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists must adopt a "paradigm shift" in the way they do missions if they are to remain relevant in a postmodern society, a longtime denominational employee told a workshop at a recent conference.

Instead of a "corporate" model of missions that has characterized the Southern Baptist Convention for more than 40 years, congregations should shift to a "kingdom church" model, which emphasizes cooperation across denominational lines, said Ron Johnson, professor of missions and evangelism at Mercer University's McAfee School of Theology in Atlanta.

"I am ecumenical in my approach to life and my approach to missions," said Johnson, a career denominational employee who formerly worked for the SBC Sunday School Board, in the evangelism departments of the Southern Baptist Home Mission Board and the Georgia Baptist Convention and taught briefly at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

During the 1950s, Southern Baptists adopted a "corporate model" for denominational agencies, Johnson told a small-group gathering at the Nov. 4-7 Reconciliation NOW (Networks of Our World) conference in Louisville, Ky.

"Because we were raised in a corporate model, our understanding of missions was a corporate vision," he said. That model emphasized financial and numerical growth and encouraged individual churches to support the denomination in the name of loyalty and pride.

Baptists have tended to function so "that each individual church is part of the denominational franchise," Johnson said.

Johnson cited a once-popular book in which former denominational leader James Sullivan described Southern Baptist polity as "a rope of sand with the strength of steel." In Sullivan's analogy, each grain of sand represented a local church, which working together could accomplish things far greater than they could separately.

In today's Southern Baptist Convention, racked by two decades of denominational infighting and the emergence of post-denominational thinking, Johnson said, "the problem is that rope has been broken into pieces."

Sullivan's rope of sand, he said, has crumbled to the ground, no longer bound together by a strong sense of denominational unity. From those individual grains, however, is springing a new vision of missions, Johnson said.

Johnson said he believes the future of Southern Baptists lies in a "paradigm shift that is postmodern in perspective." That shift, he said, has led him to understand "the reality of the kingdom church."

The "kingdom church," Johnson said, is concerned primarily with seeking and doing the will of God in its community. Instead of looking to denominational headquarters for programs, it will partner with other faith traditions, capitalizing on strengths of various faith traditions to reach the unchurched.

"When we talk about missions, we can't think about it parochially," Johnson said. To be effective witnesses in a postmodern setting, he said, "it's going to require that we garner the strengths of every tradition around us that has praxis in their particular strength."

Other denominations could learn from Southern Baptists' passion for missions and evangelism, Johnson said. In the same way, he said, Southern Baptists need to be willing to learn from other faith traditions.

For example, he said, Southern Baptists can learn from the Roman Catholic Church, which has traditionally been very strong in its social ministries. "Southern Baptists have used social ministry, unfortunately, as a license to preach the gospel," he said. The denomination has met human needs primarily as a means to an end -- evangelism -- rather than because the Bible teaches Christians should reach out to others with compassion, he said.

Johnson also said he finds it "an irony" that Southern Baptists in the past would enter into "comity agreements," pledging not to encroach into areas of the country where work performed by the denomination was already being done by other groups. "Why can't we do it together?" he asked.

He said the Southern Baptist Convention's highly publicized apology for slavery in 1996 stopped short, because it did not prompt dialogue between the races. "How can you stand up and apologize for slavery and have no further engagement?" he asked. Southern Baptists should now go to African Americans and ask, "Can you tell us how?" to continue to seek racial reconciliation, he said.

Johnson said Southern Baptists have embraced a truncated view of evangelism and missions. "We need to recover something of a sense of holism in ministry which I'm afraid we do not have," he said.

Under the corporate model, "Southern Baptists have paid our taxes to the denominational headquarters, who did our work for us," Johnson said. Now, churches are becoming interested in doing missions for themselves.

"What I am sensing is God is stirring in a lot of our churches," he said. "They are restless."

He said congregations now are asking, "How can you talk with integrity about Bold Mission Thrust [the SBC's plan to present the gospel to every person by the year 2000] when you can't even reach your own community for Christ?"

He suggested that the SBC's North American Mission Board, "instead of being a corporate kind of agency that defines what missions is in this country," should become a "catalyst" for missions in local churches and then get out of the way.

"Southern Baptists are in more trouble than they think they are," Johnson said. Sixty percent of baptisms in Southern Baptist churches are rebaptisms, he said, and only half of church members ever share their faith.

"The cold, hard fact is we are not penetrating the culture," he said. Instead, "We have become a subculture in the larger culture."

"When you are rebaptizing people and calling it church growth, that is not kingdom growth," Johnson said.

Asked if he is optimistic that churches of different faiths will find ways to cooperate, Johnson said, "I am just suspicious enough of denominations to think it won't come from the top down."

Should it take place at the local level, however, "A concerted effort of the churches to get together and talk about the lostness of their community is an astounding paradigm shift," he said.

Churches in partnership could work together to reach people who are not affiliated with any denomination, he said, without regard to which church they might eventually join. "People have the opportunity to select which faith they want to be part of, but we could work together to reach the community for Christ," he said.

Particularly in the area of social ministries, Johnson said, "There ought to be opportunities to join hands."

"The controversy among Southern Baptists is not really theological," Johnson said. "It's a response to the declining demographics of Southern Baptists."

In the 1950s, he said, the "baby boom" assured there would be evangelism as children grew and became baptized into church membership. As Southern Baptists have climbed the socio-economic ladder, they had fewer children.

Postmodernism has made matters worse, with many children growing up in blended families with little exposure to church.

"When we see declining numbers, we turn to our orthodoxy and say we don't believe the Bible enough," he said.

Evangelism methods used by many Southern Baptists amount to a "crash course" in the Christian faith. The numbers of people leaving churches, characterized by some as a "back-door" revival, "is a scandal," Johnson said.

Johnson said his goal is to lead churches not to measure success by how many buildings they have but whether they capture a sense of what God wants them to do in their community.

The move to "a kingdom-building mentality," he said, "is a shift in our thinking and it's our only hope."

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## **Catholic priest finds fellowship with Baptists in Bible Belt**

By Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- Growing up as a Catholic in northern Wisconsin before the Roman Catholic Church's Vatican II document, understanding Protestants was easy for Frank Ruff. He was right, and they were wrong.

After becoming a priest, however, Ruff moved to Georgia to plant a church in the heart of the Bible Belt. In the first six months -- in a county with 30 Southern Baptist churches -- he found a grand total of seven Catholics, two of whom were immigrants who did not speak English.

Finding himself in the minority, "I thought, maybe I should learn something about Baptists," Ruff, who now is the National Conference of Catholic Bishops liaison to the Southern Baptist Convention, told a small-group gathering at the Nov. 4-7 Reconciliation NOW (Networks of Our World) conference in Louisville, Ky.

Ruff began his study of Baptists in the library of Truett-McConnell College, a nearby school affiliated with the Georgia Baptist Convention. "I'm really glad I went to a Baptist college to learn about Baptist life from a Baptist perspective," he said, instead of relying on portrayals of the faith written from a Catholic perspective.

As he continued to study Baptists, he was asked to speak on the subject. One invitation brought him to the Baptist Student Union at Furman University, a Baptist school in Greenville, S.C. After time ran out at the lecture hall, the group moved to the library to continue the conversation. When the library closed, Ruff moved to a male dormitory where he was staying, and continued to talk with students for most of the night.

"It was a conversion for me," Ruff said. "I found family that I never knew existed."

Before the experience, Ruff said he had felt alone in White County, Ga. Afterward, he discovered that had he seen things differently, he would have recognized he was near many brothers and sisters in Christ in other denominations.

"What came with that conversion was joy," Ruff said. "The joy of discovering family."

That revelation meant change.

"Once you know you've got family, you can't act anymore as if you don't," Ruff said. "You've got to communicate with the rest of the family."

One way Ruff sought to interact with Baptists was to attend worship at their churches. "I'm confident that the time I spend in Baptist churches is more effective than any amount of time I spend talking to people" in interfaith dialogue, he said.

Worshipping together, he said, "takes away fear and prejudices and it builds trust" across denominational lines. "We need to acknowledge we've got a lot of fear of each other," he said, adding that Baptists and Catholics have "a long, long history of isolation and separation."

Official dialogue between Southern Baptists and Catholics has been going on since 1978, Ruff said. While there has been some meaningful work, "it hasn't been publicized," except in academic journals, he said.

"I think we have to move beyond dialogue," Ruff said. "If we want to let God do the work of reconciliation between Baptists and Catholics, we're going to have to pray for that a lot more."

Ruff said he shared that concern with an employee of Southern Baptists' Woman's Missionary Union auxiliary who reported that WMU leaders will discuss the issue in a future planning session.

Southern Baptists and Catholics have "hurt each other," Ruff said. There is a "backlog of forgiveness" that needs to take place, he said.

"Maybe we can even learn to love one another as family members," he said. "And I think the Lord would be pleased by that."

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## **Student who befriended blacks honored 39 years later as hero**

By Bob Allen

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- As one of the few white students who in 1957 befriended Elizabeth Eckford and other African-American students at Central High School in Little Rock, Ark., Ken Reinhardt faced ostracism, intimidation and violence from white classmates.

After graduation, Reinhardt said, little was said about the experience, until he and Eckford became subjects for two projects by three high school students which won National History Day prizes in June 1996.

"What happened that week and what has happened since has literally changed our life," Reinhardt told a group attending a conference on Christian reconciliation in Louisville, Ky.

Eckford, one of the first nine African-American students to attend Central High following a federal order to integrate the school, did not have a phone, and therefore did not hear of plans for the Little Rock Nine to meet at their old school and be escorted to Central by ministers.

Showing up alone, she faced an angry mob before being turned away by National Guard troops. Finally, a white woman in the crowd helped her escape onto a city bus. The other eight students arrived later, and were also denied entrance.

Even after federal troops were sent to Little Rock to enforce President Dwight Eisenhower's desegregation order, the harassment continued. Each black student had a military guard assigned to accompany him or her to class. Still, black students were tripped and slammed into lockers by white students. The soldiers did not intervene and the white students were never punished, Reinhardt said.

"Race had never been an issue in my home," Reinhardt told a workshop at the Nov. 4-7 Reconciliation NOW 1998 conference held at Louisville's St. Matthews Baptist Church.

While Reinhardt confessed he had never given any thought to separate restrooms and drinking fountains for whites and blacks and other symbols of segregation while growing up in the South, he regarded blacks as fellow humans who were loved by God.

That attitude was in marked contrast to the feelings of many whites. A book in the library at Central High, which was considered one of the best high schools in the nation, contained the following quote: "The Negro race has smaller brains than Caucasians and are therefore incapable of normal intelligence."

One day during lunch, Reinhardt said he sat down at the table where Jefferson Thomas, one of the nine black students, was eating alone and outstretched his hand.

"I told him not everyone hated him and I was glad to have him at our school," Reinhardt recalled. The next day, a group of white students shoved Reinhardt against a locker and told him not to associate with "niggers."

"I hope that word is as repugnant to your ears as it is to mine," he said. He said the word is not in his vocabulary, but he used it in telling his story because he heard it daily during his senior year.

Reinhardt ignored the threats, and continued to speak to the black students daily. Reinhardt said he was repeatedly called "nigger lover" and "traitor" to his face.

His parents began receiving insulting and threatening phone calls at their home. "I hope you're proud of your nigger-loving son," Reinhardt recalled one such anonymous call. "My dad would say, 'I sure am' and hang up."

One call said a mob was planning to beat Reinhardt up at a bus stop. The threat didn't materialize, but the stress began to take a toll on the family. Reinhardt said his mother grew a white streak in her hair in a matter of days.

Reinhardt said the black students had similar but more frightening experiences. The mother of one of the Little Rock Nine received a fraudulent phone call reporting her son had been killed at school. She didn't learn it was a hoax until she got there.

Concerned about his safety, Reinhardt's parents restricted his night and weekend activities. "As the school year progressed, I became more and more isolated from my classmates," he said.

His principal suggested Reinhardt's parents accompany him to his graduation and then leave immediately. They did, without incident.

Near the end of the school year, however, Reinhardt's worst tormenter walked up to him in gym class and punched him in the face. "Nothing was done about it, and that was the end of it," he said.

In 1959, Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus closed all high schools in Little Rock rather than integrate them. Eckford and the other Little Rock Nine moved to St. Louis, where they lived with volunteer families recruited by the NAACP.

Eckford didn't graduate, but later got her graduate equivalency degree and went on to college. Diagnosed with post-traumatic-shock syndrome, she had to give up teaching and lives on disability.

Two years ago, three high-school students chose the integration of Central High School for their projects for National History Day.

They interviewed Eckford, and asked if any of the white students had been kind to her. She said just two students in her speech class: Ann Wilson and Ken Reinhardt.

After the project was entered, Reinhardt was invited to be recognized at the National History Day celebration at the University of Maryland.

In the process of trying to decide whether to accept, Reinhardt and his wife, Judy, drove to Little Rock to visit with Eckford. It was the first time they had seen or talked with each other in 39 years.

"Until that day in Elizabeth's home, I had no idea our daily conversations meant so much to her," he said. Eckford later was quoted as saying the only thing that got her through some days was "knowing two students in her speech class would acknowledge her existence," Reinhardt said.

Before Reinhardt left, Eckford "asked me to thank my parents for how I was brought up and for what they had endured," he said. After "a lot of hugging and crying," they all decided to go to the three-day observance in June 1996.

While there, Reinhardt was interviewed by CNN, NBC and National Public Radio. The Washington Post ran a two-page story on Eckford's experience on the day the awards were announced.

"It was the most honored that Judy and I have ever felt, and it was a healing, affirming and positive experience for Elizabeth," Reinhardt said. "She went home to absolutely no fanfare, no recognition."

Since then, Reinhardt, who lives in Louisville and is a member of St. Matthews Baptist Church, has told his story to the Louisville Courier-Journal and the Dallas Morning News. Southern Baptists' Home Life magazine reported the story, and the Kentucky Baptist paper Western Recorder did two stories.

In response to the publicity, Reinhardt said he received countless notes and phone calls from friends and business acquaintances who apologized "because they believed if they had been there, they would have persecuted the Little Rock Nine as well."

In September 1997, Little Rock commemorated the 40th anniversary of the integration of Central High. President Bill Clinton and Arkansas Gov. Mike Huckabee spoke. Ernest Green, the only senior of the Little Rock Nine, also addressed the crowd, saying, "If just one black child is encouraged by our experience, then the Little Rock Nine becomes the Little Rock Ten."

Also at the event, Eckford was reunited with another white student, Hazel Massery, the girl in the famous photograph showing a white student taunting Eckford as she walked past, chanting: "Two, four, six eight. We don't want to integrate."

A few years later, Massery tracked Eckford down by phone to apologize, but they had never met before last year.

"They have become friends," Reinhardt said. "They are currently taking an adult-education class together and are in the early stages of co-authoring a book."

In a question-and-answer session, Reinhardt said he believes "there has been a sea change" in attitudes about race since the 1950s, but that change hasn't resulted into equal opportunities for all blacks.

Reinhardt said when he was a young person in Little Rock, his church "totally tiptoed around" the race issue. At the ceremony last year, every church in the city was represented. Unlike four decades earlier, there was no question about blacks and whites gathering together.

As a banker, Reinhardt said he formerly confronted people for language he considered racist. Now, he said, a person can be fired for a racial slur. "Now people know it's not acceptable," he said. "Whether they agree with it or not or follow it out in their personal lives, they know it."

But he quoted a speaker who noted, as a white, he was born into a place of privilege in American society. Whites are still born into privilege, Reinhardt said.

Nor has prejudice been eliminated, he said. "I've never met a person in my life who wasn't prejudiced," Reinhardt said. "I'm prejudiced today, about things other than race. Those thoughts come. Those feelings come. I know it's wrong. Just because you know the way things ought to be doesn't mean you make them right."

Reinhardt said he doesn't believe Americans will ever achieve total reconciliation between blacks and whites. "I don't think we'll get there till the Lord comes," he said. "I don't think it'll ever be totally resolved."

In light of that, he urges others to "make as much progress as we can."

The best progress, he said, "is one on one," by establishing friendships across racial lines. Such relationships can help white people better understand problems and attitudes of other races.

"Until a friend of yours is hurt, I don't think it sinks in," he said.

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