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Church Christmas pageants may be bigger today, but the concept isn't new

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- While church Christmas pageants may have advanced from bathrobes to elaborate costumes during modern times, the basic idea is anything but new.

Christians have been telling the gospel story through drama since at least the fifth century, according to Lyndel Vaught, associate professor of church music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

"Everything that goes around comes around," said Vaught, who himself directed special events as a music minister for more than 30 years.

Scholars agree the church of the fifth century used dramatic devices, but the earliest surviving example of a church drama comes from the 10th century, he explained.

"By the time of the 10th century, there was an introit, a piece of music in dialogue form which represented the three Marys coming to the tomb," Vaught said. "This really is the first example of a liturgical drama that used dialogue, and the accounts indicate it was sung but also accompanied by dramatic action."

Liturgical drama reached its peak in the 12th and 13th centuries, Vaught said. Those events were a mixture of sacred and secular elements, much like many Baptist churches put together today in Christmas programs.

The church drama went through several variations in the following centuries, including the madrigal and then opera.

Opera eventually gave birth to the Broadway musical. And that, in turn, eventually influenced the church drama, Vaught explained.

He points to 1968 as a pivotal year, "the advent of the church musical in Baptist churches." That was the year the youth musical "Good News" premiered, becoming the first in a long line of musical dramas used to tell biblical stories in a Broadway-like fashion, combining choral numbers with a dramatic story.

These new church musicals weren't confined to youth choirs for long. Soon adult choirs had their own dramatic musicals, and the Christmas cantata gave way to the Christmas musical and ultimately the Christmas pageant.

Around 1972, the Christmas program in Baptist churches took a new twist that some thought might be a passing fad but has endured now more than 25 years: The Living Christmas Tree.

This, too, began as a vehicle for youth programs but soon expanded to include a growing number of adult choirs. Pinpointing exactly where the Living Christmas Tree concept originated is difficult, but some believe the first such event was staged not in a church but by a secular choir in North Carolina. The Charlotte Choral Society put 85 singers in a 33-foot-high tree of steel construction in 1958.

But it was a Baptist minister of music who brought this trend into the church. In 1963, John Gustavson introduced the Living Christmas Tree at First Baptist Church in Van Nuys, Calif. Word quickly spread, and other Baptist churches began copying the idea.

First Baptist Church of Denton, Texas, led by then Minister of Music Bill Shadle, and Bellevue Baptist Church in Memphis, Tenn., were the first two churches to copy the Van Nuys tree, according to Shadle.

It was The Texas connection, however, which turned out to spread the use of the Living Christmas Tree worldwide. When Shadle returned to Denton from California, he asked a member of his church, Millard Heath, if he could design the structure needed to form the backbone of the Living Christmas Tree.

Heath, a mechanical engineer who owns a heating and air conditioning business, gladly did so, creating a perfectly balanced and secure structure of steel and wood that could be covered with greenery and lights to look like an enormous Christmas tree while allowing space for singers to stand in ascending rows inside the tree.

Word of mouth quickly spread, and soon Heath was approached by other churches about building such a structure for their use. Eventually, he patented the design and launched a second business called MH Specialities to produce the Living Christmas Trees.

Business peaked in the late 1980s, when Heath and his wife, Pat, shipped out 37 trees in one year. Though things have slowed down a bit, they still sell 10-15 trees each year, Pat Heath said. Last year they sold one to the City of Bethlehem, to be used on Manger Square.

Churches may spend anywhere from \$10,000 to \$40,000 on the trees and accessories, such as greenery, ribbons, bows, lights, stars and crosses, she continued. While that may sound expensive, it's actually economical considering the many years a church will use the tree, she added.

Vaught said the Living Christmas Tree, with its computerized light displays, may be only one of a continuing series of technological innovations that will shape church productions in the years ahead.

"What I see in the future is a greater and expanded use of technology," Vaught explained. "Costs are coming down. ... It's more accessible to many churches."

Whether tempted by Living Christmas Trees, video, Broadway-style dramas or something else, the danger any church faces, Vaught said, is remembering the underlying reason for the production. Worship, "which remains the most important thing the church does," must not be replaced by pageants and special events, he warned.

And pageants and special events should be tied to a well-planned outreach effort, Vaught added. "Churches that follow up on it have seen some significant results."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Photos of Millard and Pat Heath at their Living Christmas Tree factory are available from the Baptist Standard. Call Mark Wingfield at (214) 630-4571, ext. 23.

Falwell launches national TV talk show of his own

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- Saying he's tired of being the "token conservative" on America's "liberal" talk shows, Jerry Falwell has launched his own weekly television talk show.

"Listen America with Jerry Falwell" premiered in October and is rapidly expanding its viewing audience, Falwell reported in the December issue of his National Liberty Journal newspaper.

The 60-minute program, carried on broadcast and cable outlets, also is available to individuals with satellite dishes. By January, the program should be carried on networks that reach 60 million homes, Falwell said.

The program is "distinctively different from all other talk shows because it is not only politically conservative but approaches every issue from the Judeo-Christian perspective," he said. "As program host, I try hard to show why CNN calls me the 'Godfather' of the Religious Right.' I attack liberalism and anti-Christian forces in the head-on, straight-forward and hard-hitting manner as I have while a guest on the network shows over the past 20 years."

Topics of Falwell's programs to date have included the Y2K computer problem, "the gay and lesbian agenda," the Clinton impeachment hearings, and the "Disney betrayal of the family."

Falwell's initial guests have included two veteran talk show hosts, Larry King and Geraldo Rivera. Another of his initial guests was Paige Patterson, president of the Southern Baptist Convention and president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C.

"Listen America" airs live on Fridays at 10 p.m. Eastern time.

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-- By Mark Wingfield

Former SBC leader dies in Oklahoma

SALLISAW, Okla. (ABP) -- Prominent conservative Oklahoma pastor and former Southern Baptist leader Eldridge Miller died Nov. 17 following a triple-bypass heart operation.

Miller, 71, retired in 1997 as pastor of First Baptist Church in Sallisaw, Okla. He was an officer of the Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee in the early 1990s, after conservatives had gained control of the key committee which drafts budgets and sets policies for the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group.

He served terms as both recording secretary and vice president during a sometimes-tumultuous era that saw the Executive Committee fire the top editors of the official SBC news service, Baptist Press, and sever longstanding ties with the Baptist Joint Committee, a Washington religious-liberty coalition established by Southern Baptists in 1936.

While serving on the Executive Committee, Miller also represented Oklahoma at closed-door meetings to discuss strategies for conservatives to extend their control of the national denomination into Baptist state conventions.

According to a report of his death in the Oklahoma Baptist Messenger, Miller was pastor of First Baptist Church in Sallisaw from 1973 to 1997. Since retiring, he had been interim pastor at First Baptist Church in Warner, Okla. Before coming to Oklahoma, he was minister of evangelism at First Baptist Church in Fort Smith, Ark.

In addition to serving on the Executive Committee, he also was on the SBC Resolutions Committee. He was a trustee of Oklahoma Baptist University and preached the annual sermon at the Baptist General Convention of Oklahoma in 1995.

Survivors include his wife of 51 years, five daughters, four sons, 21 grandchildren, two great-grandchildren, a brother and a sister. Funeral services and burial were in Sallisaw.

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-- By ABP staff

Congress makes little history through religious-liberty votes

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The 105th Congress did little to change the boundaries separating church and state in the United States, but it wasn't for lack of trying, religious-liberty analysts said.

The concept of the separation of church and state "did pretty well considering the make-up of the Congress," said Rob Boston, a spokesman for Americans United for Separation of Church and State. While Boston noted the "most radical attacks" on church-state separation failed passage, he said he is still disturbed by "the fact that they are being proposed with such vigor."

Boston said the religious-liberty highlight of the outgoing Congress was failure of the "so-called Religious Freedom Amendment" to the Constitution. For the second time since passage of the Bill of Rights, the House of Representatives voted on a measure to alter the religious-liberty protections in the Constitution. It failed to receive the necessary two-thirds vote for passage but received the support of a majority of House lawmakers.

Offered by Rep. Ernest Istook, R-Okla., the amendment would have allowed some forms of government-sponsored prayer and tax-financed religious education and activities. While many religious groups supported the amendment, other groups, including AU, said it would result in government favoring some religions over others. "It was certainly gratifying to have won," Boston said, "but ... it is disappointing that a measure that extreme garnered a majority vote in Congress."

In addition to defeat of the Istook amendment, Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Brent Walker viewed the passage of bills protecting charitable donations and religious liberty abroad as highlights of the session.

The Religious Liberty and Charitable Donation Protection Act, signed into law in the summer, will protect tithes and other charitable donations from bankruptcy laws that have been used to confiscate donations by bankrupt individuals.

Also signed into law was the International Religious Freedom Act. After several modifications throughout the 105th Congress, the law establishes new entities to monitor religious persecution abroad and mandates that the president take action against countries that permit persecution.

On the negative side, Walker said, "Pressure is building for voucher schemes to funnel tax dollars to religious education and church-based social services."

Boston also said he was disturbed by the popularity of voucher plans that would indirectly provide tax dollars for private and religious schools. "Vouchers used to be voted down routinely and now they're passing the Congress, and the only thing that is keeping them from becoming law is Clinton's veto pen," he said.

The 105th Congress marked the first time that a bill providing tax dollars to help pay tuition at private and parochial schools passed both houses of Congress. It would have provided 2,000 low-income students in the District

of Columbia up to \$3,200 to pay tuition and transportation costs at public, private and parochial schools. Clinton vetoed the measure.

The Supreme Court has ruled giving tax dollars directly to parochial schools is unconstitutional, but many church groups argue that vouchers would get around church-state problems by giving parents final choice about where to send their children to school.

Forest Montgomery, counsel for the National Association of Evangelicals, was encouraged by passage of the voucher bill despite Clinton's veto. "There will be a continued push among social conservatives to pass vouchers," Montgomery said. He added that the push is not just because of a desire to send kids to religious schools but because of problems in public schools.

Another current church-state hot spot is the debate over government funds for faith-based social services. While religiously affiliated groups already can receive funds with certain safeguards, new proposals -- modeled after the "charitable-choice" provision in the welfare reform package -- would allow tax money to flow directly to pervasively sectarian groups such as churches. Debates would inevitably rage over the amount of government regulation that could follow the dollars, according to religious-liberty advocates.

"Lawmakers on both sides of the aisle are rushing to support these plans with very little concern for the separation of church and state," Boston said. "It represents a revolution in how the federal government interacts with churches and faith-based social-service programs."

Diverse religious groups failed to build momentum behind a measure designed to bolster protections for religious liberty. The Religious Liberty Protection Act was introduced after the Supreme Court partially invalidated a similar 1993 law protecting the free exercise of religion.

Boston said the RLPA effort "just never took off." He said the 1993 Religious Freedom Restoration Act was helped by a united front and "until we have that spirit again, it's probably best not to go forward with legislation."

Montgomery also said he would not fault Congress for the failure to pass RLPA. "Congress was waiting patiently for the [Coalition for the Free Exercise of Religion] to agree upon something they could all support."

Walker said the coalition would "redouble its efforts to ensure religious liberty through a strong bill" in response to the demise of RFRA. "Wall-to-wall support in the coalition is desirable, but not absolutely necessary," he said. "Fringe nay-sayers cannot be permitted to thwart this much-needed legislation."

Steven McFarland, director of the Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said he would give the 105th Congress a B-plus grade on religious liberty. He praised Congress' action on religious liberty abroad and the tithing bill, where "a major epidemic was quickly remedied."

But McFarland said the Congress "wasted a lot of time with political window dressing" in its effort to pass the Istook amendment. "It was a waste of political capital, time and attention," McFarland said. "That lowered their grade in my book."

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Faith helps Baptist minister bounce back from injuries

By Rob Marus

SANDY HOOK, Mo. (ABP) -- Dave Bennett's job is to share with people how Christ can change their lives. He never expected that a simple sin would change his life so dramatically.

The Missouri Baptist Convention evangelism director points to a momentary slip -- letting himself give in to frustration and anger -- as the cause of an accident that has cost him his hip, his health and much pain and suffering.

But he said the resulting experience has brought him closer to God and has made him more sensitive to the heartaches and needs of those with whom he shares the gospel.

On the evening of Jan. 27, 1997, Bennett returned from a meeting in Oregon to his farm in Sandy Hook, Mo., 20 miles northwest of the convention's offices in Jefferson City. The season's first severe winter storm had left 5 inches of snow on the ground, and Bennett knew he must get some hay out of his barn to feed his horses.

His wife, Tige, who is a professor of communications at Missouri Baptist College in St. Louis, was staying at the apartment they keep in Maryland Heights. She spends about half her week there, and Bennett wouldn't hear from her until about 10 p.m. -- their usual time to talk by phone when they're apart.

As night was falling, he went out to his barn, which sits about 120 feet from his house, to get the hay. "It was really cold," Bennett recalled. "I tried to pull some hay loose.

"Well, my hay stored on the ground was frozen solid. I couldn't get it loose, so I crawled up into my barn loft."

The hay bales in the loft were protected from the snow and rainwater that had frozen the bales down below to the ground.

Nevertheless, the 50-pound bale Bennett reached for was wedged in.

Perched 12 feet above the barn's frozen-solid mud floor, he began to struggle with the hay. "I was frustrated," he said. "And I was standing in leather-soled cowboy boots on this smooth barn loft floor. I yanked really hard, and the bale just burst -- and I went falling backwards."

Bennett recalls exactly what went through his mind as he fell. "I remember thinking, 'This could kill you.' Then I thought, 'Don't hit your head; you're a preacher. Don't break your right hand; you're an artist. And, don't break your legs; you're a farmer.' My thoughts actually went in that order."

None of those things happened. Instead, Bennett landed on his left side, shattering his left hip and wrist.

Initially, he didn't feel pain in the hip. "I thought I had broken my ribs, because I could feel pain there," he said. "Well, I thought, 'You've got to get to help.'"

But two major obstacles lay in front of him -- first a barbed-wire fence, then the 40 icy yards to his back door. He started to pray.

"I tried to stand up, but everything just folded underneath me. I started to faint, but I prayed and said, 'Please give me strength.'"

To make matters worse, his 120-pound Great Pyrenees dog, Mousse, spotted her master on the ground and thought he wanted to play. She pounced on him until Bennett convinced her he was not in any mood for wrestling.

"I got her leg, and twisted it a little until she whimpered," he explained. "Then I said, 'Back!' And she got the message."

Bennett had to burrow through the snow under the lowest strand of barbed-wire. By this time, severe pain was beginning to set in.

He dragged himself with his right arm and leg the rest of the way to the door. "I have these French doors that we intentionally built into the house. They have French handles, which are easier to open, so I thanked the Lord for that."

Once inside his kitchen, Bennett hauled himself up on his good leg long enough to reach the phone. The emergency team that arrived to treat him was forced to call for a helicopter, which airlifted Bennett to the University of Missouri Medical Center in Columbia.

He was in the hospital for 13 days and had a series of pins and braces inserted into his wrist and hip during a nine-and-a-half-hour surgery. He spent another four weeks at the home of his son, Chad, who at the time was the pastor of First Baptist Church in Stover, Mo., about 40 miles away.

Chad and his wife, Darla, volunteered to take care of Dave so Tige could continue to work in St. Louis. They had to retrain him to do everything from bathing himself to making his lunch.

He then moved to his apartment in St. Louis, where Tige continued his rehabilitation for another eight weeks.

"With two weeks in the hospital, four weeks at Chad's, it took about 16 weeks before I could come back to work," Bennett said. "I had some vacation saved up, and I had sick leave I hadn't taken. So, I appreciate Missouri Baptists for providing me that kind of benefits so I would not have to give up my job."

Bennett used a wheelchair for a period of time. Soon he moved on to a walker, then crutches, followed by two canes and finally a single cane. His rehabilitation went so well that he could walk two to three city blocks without any sort of aid by the summer of 1997.

But, unbeknownst to Bennett or his physicians, a series of viral and fungal infections were inflicting irreparable damage on his hip. His body fought the infections well enough that he never registered a significant fever, but pain and immobility soon returned.

By February 1998, his doctors were talking about installing a prosthetic hip because X-rays showed problems they attributed to improper healing of the hip socket.

Doctors discovered the infection when they opened him up in May 1998 for hip replacement surgery -- which they were forced to cancel. Further surgeries and treatments couldn't stop the infection.

In September 1998, Bennett had a temporary hip replacement, with an eye to a permanent prosthetic hip installation in the spring of 1999. His doctors hope this plan will eradicate the last traces of infection.

He has felt much better since the July surgery. "I've got much more energy; I'm not dragged down by infection. But the six months of not using the left leg at all has caused severe atrophy. It's shrunk 1 1/2 inches."

Bennett probably never will be able to play most sports or do heavy manual labor again. He probably will rely on at least a cane for the rest of his life. But that does not bother him as much as the feeling he had throughout the spring and summer of 1998 -- that he might never defeat the infection.

"I have a lust for life," Bennett said. "I could think of 14 ways to spend my life and have fun at every one of them. I kept trying to keep my chin up through the whole thing -- but, when every time you go back to the doctor you have a new disease, you begin to wonder, 'Can I get over this? Can my body handle this much infection without it killing me?'"

But that doubt prodded Bennett to focus on more important things. "Four times in my life -- three having to do with this hip -- I've read through the Psalms very intentionally. This summer, I read through them twice again.

"I fully believe that at the moment I die, I'm going to be with the Lord. But, I still related to David when he said, 'O, Lord, how can I praise You from the grave?' I want to serve as much as I can, as long as I can."

Bennett said realizing that he should praise God as much as he serves God has led him into more intense personal devotional and worship times -- as has relying on God's strength when he was at the end of his own.

"I almost can't live without spending time with the Lord now," he said. "I know how important it is, on a daily basis, to praise him."

Bennett said he also identifies a little bit more with the suffering of Christ, which puts him in even greater awe of what Christ went through to redeem humankind's sins. But he cautions that his physical anguish could never compare to Calvary. "My suffering was frustrating; I couldn't see much purpose in mine, except to bring me back closer to him in worship."

That doesn't mean he thinks God willed him to go through the experience. "I don't think God threw me off that barn loft -- that was my mistake," he reflected. "Maybe Satan had something to do with it."

"I think God has an ultimate purpose for our lives, but I also think he works with what we do with it. And sometimes we do stupid things."

Experience with debilitating injury raises awareness of accessibility

By Rob Marus

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Dave Bennett knows about overcoming barriers to sharing the gospel with people. As an evangelist, he's been doing that for years. Today he is acutely aware of barriers most churches probably don't think about -- physical ones.

After a lifetime of "normal" physical mobility, Bennett has spent nearly two years of dealing with a temporary disability -- a broken hip and ensuing complications. In the process, he has noticed that many churches still lack adequate accessibility for people with a variety of physical handicaps. And that's often true even if the buildings have been designed to be handicapped-accessible.

For instance, on a recent tour of the Missouri Baptist Convention offices in Jefferson City, he led the way to at least one place where a facility labeled handicapped-accessible actually could be difficult for a person in a wheelchair to enter.

"Whoever puts in handicapped-accessible facilities ought to at least try it out from a wheelchair and on crutches before they label it 'handicapped-accessible,'" Bennett said.

That's precisely the advice Lorraine Thal gives to congregations trying to make themselves more hospitable places for those with disabilities. Thal is coordinator of the Accessible Congregations Campaign, an initiative of the Washington-based National Organization for Disability.

"We like to encourage churches to ask someone with a disability to be a consultant," she said. "They have to deal with the problem on a daily basis, so they may think of things other church members haven't."

Thal acknowledged that even approaching the task of making a church building "disabled-friendly" can be daunting for a congregation -- particularly a small, non-urban one. Besides the vast array of handicaps -- everything from mental disabilities to blindness -- there is the overwhelming size of the Americans With Disabilities Act.

ADA is the landmark 1992 legislation that attempted to set standards for access to public places for those with handicaps.

Thal said resources are available to churches struggling with these issues. Besides recruiting a handicapped consultant, she suggests churches obtain copies of a book published by her organization.

"That All May Worship" provides detailed advice to congregations trying to make their buildings more accessible.

Thal also suggested churches should check with their state or national denominational offices for help.

Bennett said the benefits of reaching out to disabled people are worth the effort. "I think what we need to work for is a friendliness toward handicapped people, because the world they live in is so handicapped-unaccessible.

"If the church were handicapped-accessible, then the church would be one of the most friendly places they had ever been in. And that would make all the difference to them."

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