

Associated Baptist Press

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

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Missouri association ousts church over charismatic worship practices

MARSHFIELD, Mo. (ABP) -- A Missouri Baptist association has kicked out Calvary Baptist Church in Marshfield, a church which split last year over practices including speaking in tongues and being slain in the Spirit.

Webster County Baptist Association voted to withdraw fellowship last fall from the church over its charismatic worship practices, according to a recent report in the Missouri Baptist newspaper Word and Way.

John Shuler, the association's director of missions, said he supported the action, which passed by a vote of 102-2. "When it's detrimental to the fellowship and harmony of the association, action has to be taken," he said.

Calvary pastor Roger Hicks disagreed, saying the association's vote violated the Baptist principle of local-church autonomy. While Hicks acknowledged his views on charismatic worship have changed, he said they do not violate teachings in the Bible or the "Baptist Faith and Message."

The vote to expel passed with little discussion following a report by a doctrinal-review committee appointed by the association's executive board in April.

The committee said Hicks confirmed that the church accepts speaking in tongues, being slain in the spirit and miraculous healing since a revival last January which he described as a "powerful outpouring" of God's spirit.

In March, the Marshfield congregation split over the issue, with 173 members voting to "go praise and worship" and 121 voting to "remain fundamental conservative." The next Sunday, 76 departing members met and later formed Faith Southern Baptist Church, which was accepted into membership of Webster County Association in October and recently began construction of a new building.

Hicks said his views began to change radically two years ago, when a professor talked about revivals in Shantung, China, in a class he took at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo. He returned home to Marshfield and read a book on historic revivals before concluding those experiences were different from his own. "I was lacking a deeper walk with God," he said.

Hicks said Calvary Baptist intends to continue membership in the Missouri Baptist Convention and the Southern Baptist Convention. "Based on the 'Baptist Faith and Message' and the Bible, I don't see any conflict," he said.

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-- By Tim Palmer

SBC family statement ranked No. 4 news story by RNA

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (ABP) -- Reporters who cover religion for the secular press named a Southern Baptist Convention declaration that wives should submit to their husbands No. 4 in their ranking of top news stories for 1998.

The 50-member Religion Newswriters Association chose President Bill Clinton and Pope John Paul II as the year's top newsmakers.

Clinton's affair with Monica Lewinsky "forced us to reflect on sin, broken promises and forgiveness," the nation's religion writers said. Just as many chose the pope, citing events including his January trip to Cuba, a Vatican statement on the Holocaust and the canonization of Edith Stein.

Third in the RNA ranking was a United Methodist church jury falling one vote short of convicting Omaha pastor Jimmy Creech of violating church law by performing a same-sex marriage ceremony.

The fourth-ranked story was the addition of a family article to the "Baptist Faith and Message," the official faith statement for the 15.9 million-member Southern Baptist Convention. The article captured widespread attention in national media with its call for wives to "submit graciously" to their husband's "servant leadership." The statement, written by a seven-member committee appointed by the SBC president, also affirms the family as "the foundational institution of human society" while criticizing divorce and rejecting homosexual unions.

The writers ranked the murder of Matthew Shephard, a gay student at the University of Wyoming, No. 5. The crime caused some critics to link hate groups with others opposed to homosexuality, such as conservative Christians, and launched a national debate about whether homosexuals can change.

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-- By ABP staff

Clinton relaxes U.S. embargo of Cuba; critics unimpressed

By Bob Allen

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Clinton administration announced Jan. 5 it was relaxing the U.S. embargo against Cuba, but critics of the 37-year-old policy were unimpressed.

Administration officials said the new policy would encourage humanitarian aid to the Cuban people while continuing the embargo aimed at pressuring Fidel Castro. Critics said the policy, aimed at appeasing those on both sides of the embargo debate, changes little and that Clinton missed an opportunity to name a bipartisan committee to rethink the United States' longtime Cuba policy.

The new measure allows any U.S. resident to send money to families in Cuba and nongovernmental organizations. Currently, only those with families in Cuba can send money.

It also expands people-to-people contacts through exchanges among academics, athletes and scientists and allows the sale of food to non-governmental entities such as businesses. It also authorizes more charter passenger flights and permits direct mail service to Cuba.

"These steps are designed to help the Cuban people without strengthening the Cuban government," Clinton said. He said the steps are consistent with the administration's policies of continuing to pressure Cuba for democratic change while finding ways to reach out to the Cuban people through humanitarian aid.

The U.S. imposed the embargo in 1962 in an effort to weaken Castro, who took power in 1959. The Helms-Burton law tightened the embargo in 1996. In March, in wake of a visit to Cuba by Pope John Paul II, Clinton issued earlier measures -- including the restoration of direct passenger flights and increased sales of medicine -- which he said were designed to ease the plight of Cuban citizens and to open the door for a democratic future on the island nation.

While many Cuban Americans, a powerful voting bloc in key electoral states, strongly support the embargo, critics, including a number of international and religious leaders, say it has outlived its usefulness and unnecessarily hurts Cuban citizens.

Denton Lotz, general secretary of the Baptist World Alliance, recently issued a statement calling the embargo "a failed policy which hurts precisely the people we want to help: the children, the poor and the elderly." Lotz was traveling Jan. 6 and unavailable for comment, according to a spokesperson in his office in McLean, Va.

Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists, a Washington-based group which maintains an ongoing "sister" relationship with the small Fraternity of Baptist Churches in Cuba, said he was disappointed by the president's announcement.

While acknowledging some positives in Clinton's "nominal liberalization" of U.S. Cuba policy, Hastey lamented that the White House rejected pressure to appoint a bipartisan commission like one established by the Nixon administration leading up to normalization of relations with China.

Hastey said U.S. shows "more civility" to Vietnam and North Korea than in its Cuba policy. "Reluctantly, my conclusion is the president continues to play political ball with the anti-Fidelist groups in Florida and New Jersey, where presidential politics are very important because these two states represent so many electoral votes," he said.

Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, another group opposing the embargo, said he was encouraged at first by reports of the president's announcement but grew "more cynical" the more he heard.

Sehested, who, like Hastey, has visited Cuba numerous times, said most Americans' conception of Cuba is not based on facts but on the sentiments of one part of the Cuban expatriate community that is staunchly anti-communist and pro-embargo.

"So much of what we think is the reality in Cuba is just a lie," said Sehested, who lives in Lake Junaluska, N.C.

Other Cuban Americans also oppose Castro but have concluded that the embargo is not an effective way to remove him from power, Sehested said. Hasteley said he believes the embargo actually helps Castro by allowing him to continue to play the anti-American card with his supporters.

Likewise, the business community increasingly is voicing doubts about the embargo, which both Sehested and Hasteley said will ultimately have more influence on U.S. policy than either religion or politics.

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Religious leaders announce summits to promote civility

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Warning that meanness and strident partisanship are taking a heavy toll on American politics, Christian, Jewish and Muslim leaders announced plans for a series of summits to promote civility in the public arena.

A national summit scheduled Jan. 26 in Washington, D.C., is designed to highlight the importance of civil discourse in public life and ways the religious community can foster "a more civil debate and a more tolerant society." The national summit will be followed by local forums at various sites around the country.

"Incivility must be stopped before it completely stops the progress of our nation," said Welton Gaddy, executive director of The Interfaith Alliance and one of the organizers of the summit.

"Much of the public seems unable to deal with critical problems without resorting to destructive rhetoric and demonizing opponents," said Gaddy, who also is pastor of Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La.

Gaddy said the country is "reaping the bitter fruits of politicizing faith and defining morality in terms of a partisan agenda. It's time for that to stop."

That view was underscored by Azizah Al-Habri, president of KARAMAH, Muslim Women Lawyers for Human Rights, who said the vindictiveness, meanness and character assassination common in American politics "can only undermine the democratic structure of this country."

Al-Hibri, a law professor at T.C. Williams School of Law at the University of Richmond, said outbursts of incivility connected with the debate over impeaching President Clinton "are a severe symptom of a contagious moral disorder that must be treated before it destroys the heart and soul of our nation."

The destructive words of that debate, she said, "collectively far exceed in their harmful effects on our nation the morally offensive actions of an embarrassed leader."

Rabbi David Saperstein, director of the Religious Action Center of Reform Judaism, said public discourse has "reached an alarming low" and that the politics of personal attack is "chasing away the best and the brightest from the call of public service."

The religious leaders announced the summit plans at a press conference Jan. 5 as the U.S. Senate prepared to open an impeachment trial of President Clinton on Jan. 7.

Gaddy urged senators to rise above partisanship.

"The Senate can and must begin to repair the fabric of our society," he said. "How the Senate conducts its business and reaches its conclusion will be every bit as important as the final decision it makes about the fate of the president."

Among participants at the planned summit will be Martin Marty of the University of Chicago; James Forbes, senior minister of Riverside Church in New York; and Father Robert Drinan, a former member of Congress who now teaches law at Georgetown University.

Gaddy said religious leaders have a chance "to step forward and model among ourselves, as well as we demand of others, civility in public life."

The religious leaders said their message is directed at both parties and rejected a suggestion that the effort was a shot at Republicans.

"I am a Republican. I don't think I would do that," said Al-Hibri.

Asked whether Pat Robertson or other Religious Right leaders had been invited to the national summit Gaddy said, "We have on the table now invitations to people who represent those points of view."

Local forums will be convened in New York City; Des Moines, Iowa; San Francisco; Atlanta; Orlando; Manchester, N.H., and Nashville, Tenn.

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Vermont Supreme Court upholds exemption for charitable property

By Larry Chesser

MONTPELIER, Vt. (ABP) — The Vermont Supreme Court has ruled that the separation of church and state is not violated by a state law exempting churches and other charitable organizations from "adverse possession" claims against their property.

The ruling came in a dispute over a driveway separating a Methodist church and an adjacent business. Surveys showed that the driveway, which had been used for years by Cold Hollow Cider Mill, was owned by Waterbury Center Community Church.

In most cases, Vermont law sets a 15-year time limit for property owners to assert exclusive possession and use of property that is being used by others. But the 15-year limitation does not apply to property owned by "public, pious or charitable" organizations.

Eric and Francine Chittenden, owners of the cider mill, argued that exempting churches from the time limitation unconstitutionally advances religion.

But a trial court and Vermont's highest court sided with the congregation. The state Supreme Court said the challenged law provides no support for religious activities but instead, "provides an exemption from a law that might inhibit religious activities."

The exemption's purpose and effect, the court said, are "not to advance religion but to shield real property devoted to charitable purposes from adverse ownership claims."

Ten religious organizations filed a friend-of-the-court brief supporting the church in the dispute.

The religious groups' brief argued that the exemption does nothing to encourage religious practice.

"It simply removes a burden from religious organizations; losing property clearly burdens religious practice and religion in the most fundamental way," the brief argued. "The removal of this considerable burden, however, is not a purpose that raises even the slightest constitutional concerns."

Religious groups joining the brief are the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints; Baptist Joint Committee; Christian Legal Society; First Church of Christ, Scientist; General Council on Finance and Administration, United Methodist Church; Clifton Kirkpatrick as stated clerk of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.); Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints; Seventh-day Adventist Church; United House of Prayer for All People of the Church of the Rock Apostolic Faith; and the Worldwide Church of God.

The Vermont court's ruling was applauded by Brent Walker, Baptist Joint Committee general counsel.

"It was important for the court to understand that not every accommodation of religion amounts to an impermissible establishment of religion," he said.

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Spirituality is good medicine, more doctors believing

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- At Renaissance Women's Health Associates in Dallas, Dr. Margaret Christensen concerns herself with both the physical and spiritual health of her patients.

When new patients visit the obstetrics and gynecology practice, they answer the typical questions about their medical history, insurance coverage and current health. But Christensen also asks an unusual question: "How do you meet your soul or spiritual needs?"

Most women are "very glad" to answer such a question, she explained. "Most women know what I'm talking about, and for many it doesn't have anything to do with organized religion."

The doctor attempts to diagnose not the church affiliation of her patients but the health of her patients' souls.

"We are much larger than our physical bodies," she said. "Our spirit, our soul is integral to what defines us as human beings."

For a doctor to address only the physical issues of a patient is dangerous, she said, because soul problems often create physical problems. "A lot of the issues I see -- especially depression -- have to do with women who are in some soul or spiritual crisis."

The examination rooms at Renaissance Women's Health Associates display an assortment of religious-themed artwork: plaques with prayers inscribed upon them, religious icons and illustrations. And a copy of the organization's mission statement also is posted in each room. That statement talks about the doctors' desire "to support the whole woman physically, emotionally and spiritually."

Christensen also prays with her patients -- during examinations, during labor and delivery, and before surgery. If a pastor or priest visits the patient, the doctor gladly joins them in prayer.

Prayer has a definite effect on the health and well-being of patients, Christensen said, an effect increasingly reported in scientific studies published in medical journals.

These studies have explored the impact of intercessory prayer on coronary patients, the effect of church attendance on overall health, the effect of faith on blood pressure and the life expectancy of churchgoers over non-churchgoers. Most of the time the faithful fare better.

As news of this mounting case of research spills out, more doctors like Christensen are talking with patients about the power of faith and are praying with or for their patients.

"There are a lot of us out there who do this. We just don't talk about it," Christensen said.

One place where doctors talk about such issues in greater depth is the National Institute for Healthcare Research, a non-profit organization that describes its mission as acting as a "catalyst and clearinghouse for research into the relationship between spirituality and health."

The Washington-based institute has held conferences and published literature about the connection between faith and health, prayer and healing.

David Larson, president of the institute, explains in a promotional video that he was trained as a physician to believe faith harmed medicine. When he began to question that assumption, he discovered the opposite actually is true. Faith helps medicine, he says.

Dale Matthews, his colleague at Georgetown University Medical School, adds that "the faith factor has been demonstrated to have value."

"Religion and faith have an important medical effect," he says, citing a "therapeutic value to faith."

Doctors who acknowledge a connection between faith and health talk about "energy" and "harmony" and "control."

A primary question to ask, according to Larson, is "Who's in control?"

Under the traditional American model of healthcare, doctors have seen themselves fully in control of the treatment and outcome. But doctors who truly see themselves as healers must acknowledge that they are not fully in control, Christensen said.

"There's a difference between healing and curing," she said. "To heal means to make whole."

Doctors and patients alike, she said, must realize there are "forces beyond our control."

While researchers continue to explore the direct links between faith and health, a proper understanding of psychiatry and religion points out one of the fundamental medicinal values of faith, according to Wayne Oates, a Southern Baptist pioneer in pastoral care.

That fundamental notion is hope, he said.

"Having had a lot of illness myself, I know that one of your greatest temptations is to lose hope," Oates said. "If you find a patient who has given up, the next thing is they die."

When patients tap into the reservoir of hope found in faith, they often overcome impossible odds, Oates acknowledged. Like others in the healthcare field, he cited cases of patients who had been given only months to live but lived years longer, apparently because they were buoyed by the medicine of hope.

Oates' assessment is shared by Bob Fine, a Dallas internist who chairs the ethics committee at Baylor Medical Center.

"Anything that leads to a calming effect is almost always good in healthcare," Fine said. "Stress is deadly. Stress kills. Prayer, for many people, has that anti-stress effect. That makes it good medicine for any number of conditions."

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Why doesn't God always heal? Question sparks crisis of faith

By Mark Wingfield

ATLANTA (ABP) -- If prayer makes the kind of difference in health that so many scientific studies seem to be showing, why doesn't everyone who prays get healed?

It's a question that caused a crisis of faith for Sarah Zimmerman. Five years ago, her best friend contracted HIV, the virus that leads to AIDS.

All her life, her father had done everything he could to meet her needs, and that had shaped her view of God as her heavenly Father, Zimmerman said. "If my dad could have fixed this, he would. God could but didn't. How could that possibly be the reaction of a loving Father?"

Zimmerman, a journalist based in Atlanta, had met George several years earlier when they both lived in Oklahoma City and attended the same church. They developed a strong friendship that continued after each moved to new locations for jobs.

They talked on the phone every Saturday morning at 10. One week, George had a sinus infection. The next week he still had it. Finally, he called on a Monday night, which she knew was a sign of either really good news or really bad news.

In this case it was really bad.

She walked with him through a couple of years of failing health. She prayed for God to reveal a cure for AIDS in time to help her friend. She prayed for him to survive against the odds.

But George eventually died anyway.

Through this experience, which coincided with traumatic challenges in her own job, Zimmerman began to question God's role as a "loving Father."

"Why worship a God who claims to be the Great Physician but evidently isn't making house calls?" she asked. "I believed he existed but didn't believe he could possibly be involved in the details of my life in a loving way."

Such real-life questions trouble many sincere Christians, acknowledged Tommy Lea, dean of the theology school at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. Lea has first-hand experience with such questions, because he currently is engaged in a life-and-death battle with prostate cancer that has spread to other parts of his body.

Lea recalls that 25 years ago his wife suffered a serious eye problem that left her temporarily blind. Christians prayed for her recovery, and she was healed. Now he has cancer, and Christians are praying again, but he continues to suffer.

Lea confessed he doesn't know why the outcomes of the two diseases tackled by prayer are different.

But that doesn't diminish his faith in God or his desire for people to pray for his health, he said.

"The evidence of the presence of sickness in Scripture despite prayer and believing companions ... is so obvious that you just can't take prayer as a guarantee of healing and getting rid of all your problems," Lea said. "I do not see anywhere in Scripture a promise that all people who pray real hard in faith are going to be healed."

Even the Apostle Paul wasn't spared of disease and affliction, Lea noted. "He wasn't completely snatched out of it, but he seems to have received by prayer an ability to face the trouble and keep going."

Instead of viewing prayer as a cure-all, Christians should realize prayer provides many other benefits in accordance with God's care, he suggested.

"I'm feeling comfortable in realizing that the prayers people are praying for me are giving me strength, health, stamina and endurance. But I don't have any conviction that they're going to bring me healing," Lea said. "If God chooses to do that, I'd be pleased. ... God may not take the thorn away, but he will give us grace. Prayer becomes the means to receiving that grace."

Faith, Lea said, is "the confidence in God to meet your needs."

He and others cite hope as a vital ingredient for health and survival. Without hope, humans die.

Yet everyone -- and especially those facing health crises -- has moments of anguish and deep discouragement, Lea said. "If you get stuck in these, you'll have a difficult experience ahead."

The way out of this pit of discouragement is not searching for God's assurance that complete physical healing will come, he suggested. Rather, it is finding God's grace to face whatever comes.

"Sometimes we just have to learn to live with it," he concluded.

That's where Zimmerman eventually came out as well. For her, it was an epiphany centering in a nearly audible word from God. While playing one night with her two young nieces, she said, God asked her this question: "If it were possible for either Karen or Kimberly to die to make George well, would you let it happen?"

Zimmerman said she thought about it for a minute, finally having to acknowledge to God that no, she wouldn't do that. "He said: 'You wouldn't let one of your twin nieces die for your best friend. I let my only son die for you while you were still my enemy, and you're questioning my love for you?'"

The next Sunday, her church observed the Lord's Supper. The words of Scripture hit her like a brick: "This is my body, broken for you."

She got the point, she said, but still struggled to understand God's love. Finally, one Sunday afternoon she went to the prayer cottage at Second Ponce de Leon Baptist Church in Atlanta and found herself yelling at God.

"God, if your grace is so amazing, prove it," she said. "If you love me like a father, then pick me up and carry me. I don't see a detour, so God, pick me up. You have to carry me through this."

Then came a knock on the door. A good friend from church stepped in. "I saw your car in the parking lot and thought you needed a hug," the friend said.

And that began the journey to her own healing, she said. "Through her, God began to show me that he was going to carry me. He surrounded me with friends who let me confess my heartache and listen to my stories and pray for me and George. And God showed me that carrying me was what he wanted all along."

Understanding the connection between faith and health, Zimmerman said, involves learning the lesson of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego when they faced the fiery furnace: "God, I believe you are able to save me from this, but if you do not, I know you still love me. I trust that you are faithful. I believe you'll carry me through this. And I will choose to worship you."

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Quality of faith important in link with healing, experts say

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- If you want to understand the connection between faith and health, you first must understand authentic faith, according to those who work in this field every day.

There's a difference between people who have a superficial faith and those who have an enduring faith based deep within themselves, according to Bob Fine, an internist who chairs the ethics committee at Baylor Medical Center in Dallas.

The best health results are found in those who "pursue religion not for some secondary gain," Fine said. "Those who are most extrinsically religious have some of the worst outcomes."

Among the many studies that find links between faith and health, Fine said, this distinction between the deeply devout and the superficially devout shows up often.

That resonates with the experience of Bob Guffey, associate pastor of First Baptist Church in Shreveport, La. Guffey has worked extensively in hospice programs and other pastoral care situations.

"The people I see who seem to think they can bargain with God through their prayers, or can make promises to God in order to 'convince' God to heal them, don't have an understanding of lifelong pilgrimage with God," Guffey said.

"Their view of God is more transactional. They see God in some of the same ways the Pharisees saw God, as punishing them for their sin by causing them pain or causing pain to a member of their family. These folks seem easy prey for the TV evangelists and faith healers."

On the other hand, Guffey explained, are those who express an understanding of what it means to walk with God in a lifelong journey. For these people, prayer becomes "a way to experience the presence of God and to open a person to being shaped by God," he said.

"For many of the people I have worked with who were people of some measure of spiritual depth, the more they prayed, the more they were able to settle into the reality that God was with them whether they were cured or not."

The spiritual experience of these people gives them a longer view of life, Guffey said. "To these people, prayer is less an exercise in claiming the promises of God than it is cultivating a relationship within the presence of God."

These people have taught Guffey the difference between pain and suffering, he said. "I've found many people I would consider thoughtful, prayerful people of faith to be in pain but not suffering, for they were at peace with the reality of God's presence and their healing beyond the grave."

That has been the personal experience of two Kentucky men who have spent their careers ministering to the needs of other patients but also know what it's like to be the patient.

Herb Booth, a physician and active Baptist layman in Northern Kentucky, recently underwent some major surgeries. He found strength through prayer but not just strength linked to an assurance of healing.

"The bottom line of prayer is it changes me," he said. "It's not that you don't move mountains. But I think about Christ in the Garden of Gethsemane. He was struggling as a man with the prospect of a horrible death and would have liked it to pass from him. But in the prayer he became subservient to his Father and therein gained the strength to endure."

That also has been the experience of Wayne Oates, widely acknowledged among Baptists as the father of pastoral care but also someone who has known pain himself. For years, Oates has struggled with chronic back pain due to disc problems.

While he has not been miraculously healed, "prayer helps me endure it," said the 81-year-old professor at the University of Louisville Medical School.

The pain and the prayer together have made him a better person, he explained. "Prayer has had a lot to do with my character, with my hope.

"I pray at night sometimes: 'Help me to bear the pain as you did the Apostle Paul and help me to learn what it has to teach me.'

"Pain," Oates concluded, "makes you wise."

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Tragedy, illness, teach woman to rely on God

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- When Vicki McCrary lost her husband and 2-year-old son in a 1985 house fire, she was devastated. Yet with God's help, she said, she raised her two other children as a single parent and learned to depend on God.

But she thought she had experienced more than her fair share of pain and suffering in this life -- until she was diagnosed last February with an aggressive form of breast cancer.

Would her faith be strong enough to carry her through this life-threatening health crisis?

While others might have run away from God, McCrary saw this as an opportunity to run toward God, she said. "He is my only source of strength. When this happened, I knew that was the only place I could go."

She recalled entering her home in Fort Worth, Texas, after the 1985 fire intentionally set by her husband, who suffered from a manic depressive disorder. The only thing not burned in the living room was a framed Scripture verse, Philippians 4:13: "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me."

Though dumbfounded that God would allow such tragedy to strike her family, McCrary saw that promise of God rising from the ashes as a sign. And it was a sign that would carry her through the years ahead, even when shoved face-to-face with her own mortality.

Facing a disease like breast cancer makes mortality "a daily reality," she said. "I've taken health for granted, not really conscious of the gift God has given us."

Because God carried her through unspeakable tragedy once before, she reasoned, God could carry her through yet again. "God loved me enough to trust me with these experiences. ... Through this, all the more I can trust him."

And trust was important, because "with this diagnosis, I lost all my control of the future," she admitted.

Life may not seem fair, but God is still God, McCrary asserted. "I may not like the way it happens, but God is still in control."

Also, she has learned that "there's no event or circumstance that can take away what God has given me," she said. "It has taken years to realize that and let it sink in."

In the last year, McCrary has undergone chemotherapy, radiation, surgery and a stem-cell transplant. Each time she returned home to see the framed message of Philippians 4:13 still hanging on her living-room wall.

That reminds her, too, of a biblical song her daughters used to listen to when they were growing up. The song says, "I'm climbing my mountain one step at a time with Jesus by my side."

Life includes mountains, she said. "That is not a choice; it's a fact. As we climb our mountain, we climb it one step at a time. We don't really have a choice there, either. As much as we would like to go around it or over it, we have to take it one step at a time."

The choice, she said, is in who to take along on the journey. "Whether or not we do this with Jesus by our side, that is where we have a choice. How thankful I am that I have the assurance of Jesus being by my side each step of each mountain."

For now, her hair is growing back, and she's gaining strength. Her doctors look favorably on her medical condition.

She credits her very survival, as well as her daily strength, to the power of prayer. She has received ongoing support from her church, Mimosa Lane Baptist in Mesquite, and her coworkers at the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"I'm a walking answer to prayer. Thousands of people have prayed for me," she said. "My doctors are amazed at how well I've done, and I know it's because of the power of prayer. Prayer is a powerful tool."

While thankful for her recovery and good progress to date, McCrary realizes the final outcome of her bout with cancer may not be known. Yet through her trust in God, she said, she has learned to be content whether living on earth or headed for heaven.

"Whether I'm here, it's OK; whether I'm there, it's OK. ... Because of who God is in my life, it's OK."

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Healing not greatest miracle, says survivor of liver cancer

By Mark Wingfield

SHREVEPORT, La. (ABP) -- Pat Tharpe believes she was miraculously healed of cancer. But intercessory prayer brought her an even greater gift, she said.

When diagnosed with liver cancer, the specific prayers of friends from her Sunday school class helped her face down her fears.

"The biggest miracle was peace," she explained. "I cannot tell you the feeling I had that God was with me."

Three years ago, a team of four specialists had diagnosed the cancer after examining X-rays and evaluating her condition. They were certain it was cancer and, in fact, thought the cancer might have spread to her chest. She was scheduled for immediate surgery.

The thought of cancer scared her, but the prospect of surgery scared her even more.

She told a friend that she had depended upon prayer all her life and was glad her Sunday school class at First Baptist Church of Shreveport, La., would pray for her and the church would pray for her on Wednesday nights. "But that doesn't seem to be enough," the friend replied.

So the night before her surgery, members of her Sunday school class showed up on her doorstep with Bibles in hand. The teacher had asked each of them to search the Bible for verses about healing.

They all knelt on the floor of Tharpe's home, and each person shared the Scriptures over and over. They prayed, and they quoted Scripture. Then they prayed some more and quoted more Scripture.

Tharpe wrote the Scripture references in her Bible, while letting the words soak into her heart.

"We really, really prayed, and the main thing I needed was not to be frightened," she said. "I needed peace more than I needed healing almost. ... We prayed and read those Scriptures over and over until I felt like they were a part of me."

When the time for surgery came, "I was not frightened," she said. "The fact that I felt peace and wasn't afraid was my biggest miracle."

The doctors described another miracle, however. As expected, they found an enormous tumor around her kidney, but they were astounded to learn it was not malignant. They removed the kidney, and Tharpe has been in good health ever since, she said.

Now she recalls with amazement the power of prayer and the loving witness of her Sunday school class. They didn't just talk about prayer, but "got up and did something."

And that, she said, "sure made a difference in my life."

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