

Associated Baptist Press

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Storm spawns tornadoes in West Tennessee

JACKSON, Tenn. (ABP) -- About a dozen tornadoes ripped through West Tennessee Jan. 17, killing at least eight people and injuring 110.

The rare winter thunderstorm hit hardest in and around Jackson, Tenn.

A spokesperson for Baptist-affiliated Union University said the campus was spared the brunt of tornadoes that hit the south part of Jackson, but high winds downed tree limbs on the campus on the town's north side.

Herbert Higdon, interim director of missions for Madison-Chester Baptist Association, said to his knowledge, no Tennessee Baptist churches sustained serious damage from the storm, which hit as many congregations gathered for Sunday-evening services.

A Tennessee Baptist disaster-relief feeding unit was on standby as needs were being assessed Jan. 18, Higdon told the Baptist and Reflector newspaper. He said Baptist volunteers would be needed for cleanup, and churches in the association were collecting food and clothing for storm victims.

Red Cross centers were set up at the Jackson County Civic Center, East Union Baptist Church and in Hardeman County, another hard-hit area.

Nedra Knavel, a Union University spokesperson, said a community-wide Martin Luther King Day celebration was scheduled on the campus the day after the storm. Community and religious leaders on the program were excused to take part in relief efforts, but the service was held, with the focus shifting to prayer for tornado victims, she said.

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-- By Bob Allen, with reporting by Baptist and Reflector

Carson-Newman president announces retirement date

JEFFERSON CITY, Tenn. (ABP) -- Cordell Maddox, 22-year president of Carson-Newman College, announced Jan. 15 that he will retire at the end of July.

Maddox, 67, announced his plans at a meeting of the college's board of trustees in Jefferson City, Tenn.

The Tennessee Baptist Convention voted last fall to place more than \$2 million funding for the school in escrow pending resolution of a dispute over how college trustees are chosen. In April, trustees amended the college's 147-year-old charter to allow the board to choose its own members. Previously, the school's 36 trustees had been nominated and elected by the state convention since 1919.

A three-page press release announcing Maddox's retirement did not mention the dispute. It quoted Maddox as saying the decision to retire was not easy.

"I believe with all my heart that Carson-Newman is strong, vibrant and poised for a fabulous future," Maddox said. "That is why I am comfortable with leaving what has been the best position I've had the privilege to hold."

Jeanette Blazier, trustee chairwoman, named a committee to begin a national search for a new president. She said the search would begin immediately.

Blazier said Maddox has provided "visionary leadership" to the school. During his tenure, enrollment increased by more than 50 percent and endowment grew from less than \$3.5 million to more than \$20 million, according to the press release.

Upon his retirement, Maddox will become president emeritus.

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-- By ABP staff

Despite perceptions, most churches not reaching lost, innovative pastor says

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Most church people believe a lie, according to Texas pastor Roddy Clyde. That lie, he said, is that their churches are obeying Christ's command to reach unchurched people with the gospel.

Even many growing churches aren't reaching non-believers, said Clyde, pastor of the Fellowship at Forest Creek, formerly known as Trinity Baptist Church in Round Rock, Texas. Many seemingly successful churches have created a climate attractive to people who already are believers, and thus experience mainly "transfer growth," he said.

To back up his claim, Clyde cited research he and his colleagues have conducted. A survey of all the Baptist churches in his Texas association, for example, found that fewer than 3 percent of all the people who regularly attend services were previously unchurched. More than 97 percent had transferred their membership from another house of worship.

A similar survey in five other areas found similar percentages, Clyde said.

The modern church is "missing the point," Clyde said. "The point is to reach people for Christ and help them grow to be like him. We are missing the point by trying to keep people for Christ and helping them grow to be like us. We have become increasingly focused on maintaining the kingdom instead of growing it."

Christians should view the United States as "a mission field" and take approaches similar to ways missionaries would approach unreached people overseas, Clyde said during a breakout session in the Innovative Church Ministries seminar of the Texas Baptist Evangelism Conference Jan 11.

The primary problem is that most churches "do church in a way that is culturally irrelevant to the unchurched," Clyde maintained.

Clyde acknowledged that he and others who advocate change in traditional churches often are accused of compromising the gospel for the sake of cultural relevance. Yet he countered he has no desire to alter the basic truth of Scripture.

The reason for such accusations, Clyde suggested, is because too many church people confuse Baptist tradition with biblical truth. For example, Baptist tradition says Sunday school has to operate a certain way, while the Bible presents no such demands. Or Baptist tradition says a certain order of worship or music style is required, while those ideas are not mandated in the Bible.

The importance of becoming relevant to the culture would be obvious if people simply would think of their hometowns as mission fields, Clyde said. "Nobody in this room would finance a mission trip to Afghanistan without making sure the missionaries were prepared for the culture," he said.

To fulfill God's primary desire for the church, many more congregations should "prayerfully and purposely" transition themselves to be more culturally relevant, he asserted.

To begin that process, he suggested churches get to know the unchurched audience in their community and then adapt methods to match that audience without altering the truth of the gospel message.

He also suggested three focus questions developed through a five-year transition process at his church: does it help, does it hurt and does it matter.

If it helps achieve the primary goal of reaching the unchurched, keep doing it and emphasize it, he said. But if it hurts the primary goal, stop doing it or adapt it.

Advocating the kind of change required to turn most traditional churches into culturally relevant churches is not easy, Clyde confessed. "There is no such thing as painless transition."

He recounted some of the pains his own congregation went through during its transition from a traditional church to an innovative church. However, he also said the church now regularly brings in two to four times as many new members each year as it previously had in total attendance.

Such gains are possible only when people and churches are pushed beyond their comfort zones, Clyde said. "We cannot consistently continue to reach people for Christ within our comfort zone."

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Only thing to fear about Y2K is fear itself, editor contends

By Stacey Hamby

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- "The problem is not Y2K -- the problem is the fear of Y2K." Those were the words of Steve Hewitt, editor of Christian Computing magazine. Hewitt, a former Baptist pastor who lives in Raymore, Mo., said he is practically a lone voice in trying to quell the rising panic surrounding Y2K.

"Fear-based Y2K issues could prove to be much worse than any technology-based problem," Hewitt, said in a recent address to Missouri Baptist leaders.

Y2K is a computer-programming problem centered on the use of two digits to represent a year. Predictions are that many computers will be confused when the date rolls over to Jan. 1, 2000. Besides computer software, "embedded chips" with computer programs are in everything from coffeemakers to cars.

How bad can it be? In remarks to staff of the Missouri Baptist Convention in Jefferson City, Hewitt described two main -- and opposing -- views:

1. Y2K will be a bump in the road. "This is where I stand," he said. "It will be a personal inconvenience, almost nonexistent." Hewitt said there is the possibility of some economic impact. "This will happen because of the panic," he explained. "The greatest danger is overreaction."

2. Every aspect of society will be affected. "This includes utilities, food, banks, communications and even national security." Some alarmists are saying people should store a year's supply of food and should cash in mutual funds and certificates of deposit to buy gold.

"One world economic leader is saying there is a 70 percent chance of an economic disaster greater than the Great Depression," Hewitt said. "Bob Bennett, chairman of the Senate Y2K oversight committee, said early on that Y2K could be 'the end of western civilization as we know it.'"

Why such a variety of opinions? Hewitt offered the following reasons:

1. The information age. Hewitt said the Internet has given anyone and everyone a forum for expressing their views. "Seventy-seven percent of print journalists get their news off the Internet," he said. "They're just reporting each others' news."

2. Changing technology. "I won't do a book on Y2K, because it just moves too fast," Hewitt said. "The information would be old by the time it hit the shelf."

3. Sensational reports. "There are lots of books and videos out on this subject -- people want to sell their stuff. There's a lot of money being made with Y2K." Hewitt said national Christian leaders -- "based on poor theology" -- have been major players in sensationalizing Y2K. "Christians are leading the panic attack in America," he said. "We have a hierarchy of churchless pastors that are saying Y2K is the judgment of God."

4. Dated material is fueling Y2K fears. Hewitt cited a claim made while he was a guest on Focus on the Family's radio talk show that the president of General Motors had said no cars could be made for an entire year after Y2K.

"I asked what the source was, and I was told it was a 1998 issue of Fortune magazine," he said. "I checked it out, and no such thing was said by the GM president or anyone else. The real quotation was made back in 1996 -- that Y2K could cause 'catastrophic problems' if not solved in time." Hewitt said that quotation might have been accurate in 1996 but was outdated by the time it was repeated two years later.

5. Questionable sources. Too many people are citing stories or quotations that cannot be verified. Hewitt said he encourages people to verify sources.

6. Urban legends. "This is what started the panic," Hewitt said. Urban legends are stories that continue to be spread even after they are proven false or cannot be verified.

Hewitt said he is seeing a turnaround in what leaders are saying about Y2K. An organization often cited by alarmists, the Gartner Group, now says there are a number of myths and irresponsible assertions circulating about Y2K. The group says Y2K's effect will be more similar to a "snowstorm" than the end of civilization.

Sen. Bennett (R-Utah) also is changing his tune. Bennett has been quoted as saying, "Things are looking up for the U.S. Even if the Y2K problem is solved, the panic side of it can end up hurting us badly."

At least two mainline denominations, Assemblies of God and the Episcopal Church, have issued statements urging their churches not to believe all of the Y2K hype and to hold off on practices like hoarding food and pulling money from accounts, Hewitt said.

Why the turnaround?

1. The percentage of affected computers is not as high as once was thought, Hewitt said. "The Gartner Group says one in 100,000 chips may have a problem -- and then only if they're running as 00 turns over."

2. Fears about electricity were exaggerated. "Companies never have been able to guarantee electricity," he said. "And no one's ever been able to guarantee there will be no bugs in your computer."

3. Y2K effects are spread over a wide time range. "The date problem has been being solved already, as loans and credit card dates rolled over," Hewitt said. In 1996, credit cards with an expiration date of 2000 had problems at cash registers. So companies had to fix the problem then.

4. Embedded chips (in items such as coffeemakers and cars) now are believed not as great a "wild card" as previously thought.

While disputing alarmists, Hewitt said he believes Y2K could have the following effects:

1. Some computer glitches. "This is nothing new; we deal with them every day," he said. Addressing concerns about air travel, Hewitt said 70 percent of air traffic could go on as scheduled, because controllers already routinely use hard copies and graphs as backups to their computer systems.

2. Some economic backlash. "It's scary that people are being told to pull money from stock markets and banks," he said. If less than half the customers of credit unions pull \$500 more than usual from their accounts, Hewitt said, it will cause a \$6 billion deficit, "and they will call in loans."

Hewitt said banks can legally declare a "bank holiday" and shut down to prevent withdrawals. This law was the result of the Great Depression, when millions of people made withdrawals and banks ran out of money.

"Twenty years ago, Baptists had Bold Mission Thrust and the Assemblies of God had Harvest of Souls -- both efforts to spread the gospel by the year 2000," Hewitt noted. Now we're stockpiling bullets and food, putting bars on our doors and preparing for a disaster I don't think will happen."

Still, for Christians wanting to prepare for Y2K, Hewitt offered the following tips:

1. Prepare for an economic recession brought on by Y2K panic. "At present, I am not making any preparations (for Y2K) except to try to position myself financially for a recession," he said.

2. Get a hard copy of your credit report.

3. Check personal computers. Hewitt said to contact your computer retailer to find out how to get information to check for Y2K compliance on your system. "The problem most PC owners will have is they'll have to reset the (computer's) date to Jan. 1, 2000," he predicted.

4. Pray and strive to be informed. "Stay with mainstream sources, such as USA Today, CNN and C-Net," Hewitt said.

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Gospel artist wins battle with breast cancer

By Stacey Hamby

(ABP) -- Breast cancer. Every woman fears those words. And Connie Hopper of the gospel music group The Hoppers was no different.

"I was the doctor's last patient that day, and when he sent me to the examining room, I was shaking so badly from fright that I could hardly lie on the table."

But Connie met her fears with her faith. "I knew something had to be done, so I turned to God." She also turned to her family. Her husband, Claude, and two sons, Mike and Dean, supported her throughout her battle with breast cancer.

Connie underwent a mastectomy, and tests showed all cancer had been removed from her body.

That was 20 years ago.

"The Bible says his words are life to us and health to all our flesh, so I tell others not to be discouraged," she now says. "Don't think that things are over for you -- because you can go back and do everything you did before the cancer. And you'll be a better person in Jesus than you were before."

A turning point in Hopper's crisis came when another woman told her she had survived cancer five years earlier. "I thought I had faith, but I found it wavering," Hopper said. "But when that woman told me 'five years' -- that automatically gave me hope."

Today, Hopper uses her experience to minister to other families facing cancer.

"I've spent hours on the telephone talking with people who feel that they are at the end of their ropes," she said. "And to be honest, I've cried a lot of tears for those people."

But she always points them to the Great Physician. "If I can't point people to the Lord, then I'll never go on the bus again."

That commitment to the ministry has kept The Hoppers on the road for 40 years, singing across the nation.

"Looking back, I can see God's providential hand in it all," Hopper said. "He allowed me to see how uncertain and fleeting life is. And I know for sure that it was by his power that I am able to experience this overwhelming feeling of love and gratitude for again being with those dearest to me on earth."

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