

Nashville, Tennessee

Associated Baptist Press

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February 2, 1999

(99-10)

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Baylor Health Care alliance creates nation's 7th largest non-profit system

By Mark Wingfield and Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Baylor Health Care System will retain its vision, values and ethical codes, President Boone Powell Jr. said Jan. 26, the day the system's board voted to create a new alliance with Texas Health Resources.

The alliance of Baylor Health Care System with the parent of Presbyterian Healthcare Resources, Harris Methodist Health System and Arlington Memorial Hospital creates the largest network of non-profit hospitals in Texas, as well as the seventh-largest non-profit healthcare system in the United States.

The new umbrella organization will be called Southwest Health System. It will include a hospital holding company called BHP Health Services that integrates management, governance and clinical operations of 24 hospitals, 24 senior-care centers, 40 primary-care centers and several other patient-care facilities located in North Central Texas.

"One of the keys is that we all bring a long history and heritage to this initiative," Powell said at a news conference. "It only made sense that we have in our fundamental tenets that we protect the vision and values and ethical policies" of each of the partners.

That's not an especially difficult task, he said, because each of the partners comes from a faith-based perspective, with a goal of serving patients in the name of Christ. "We can bring our purpose and our vision and values together."

That's significant for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, which has had "a longtime interest" in the Baylor system, Powell said in an interview.

"For Baylor, the new structure permits us to keep our own mission," he noted. "The Baylor Health Care System board of directors will continue to be Baptist. Our values are intact."

"None of us -- Baylor and the other denominationally related health systems -- is required to change any of our ethical positions," Powell said. "Each of the founding institutions will have policies that cannot be changed by the combined system."

For example, he said, Baylor facilities will continue to not perform abortions. Powell described the partnership of the healthcare organizations without sacrificing the values and mission of each as "the best of both worlds."

The Baylor system board "feels very comfortable" with the new arrangement, Powell added.

"The board still will have oversight on the Baylor assets," he explained. "And all of our individual hospital boards will remain in place. They have specific duties and take on great responsibility for those hospitals."

According to guidelines approved at the 1998 Baptist General Convention of Texas annual meeting, the BGCT elects 25 percent of the Baylor system's board of directors and consults in selection of the other 75 percent. All Baylor board members are Baptists.

"We are grateful Baylor Health Care System has maintained its commitment to Baptist values, its mission statement and an all-Baptist board," said Bill Pinson, executive director of the BGCT.

The Baylor board will be represented on the boards of Southwest Health System and BHP Health Services, Powell said, noting Baylor trustees will be involved deeply in helping to govern and manage the larger alliance.

During months of negotiations leading up to the formal alliance, chaplains from each of the partner bodies met to make sure there was a "clear understanding of theology," said Douglas Hawthorne, president of Texas Health Resources, who also will carry the title of president and CEO of Southwest Health System.

The chaplains "found there was very little in terms of differences" in values and ethical codes between the various hospitals, Hawthorne said. "In all cases, we are clearly an extension of God's healing ministry."

By creating the new umbrella organization, none of the partners will surrender its own assets, although all participants will share revenue and financial gains and losses, Hawthorne and Powell said at the news conference. Southwest Health System could create new facilities and services in the future, though, and no decision has been made about what those hospitals or clinics might be called.

The administrators stressed that the new relationship is not technically a merger, since the ownership of Baylor's assets will not change. However, the new umbrella organization will manage the assets and operations of all partner entities.

The assets of the foundations serving each of the partner health care systems are specifically excluded from the new agreement.

Officials said the new alignment is necessary because of the highly competitive nature of the health care market and the challenge of serving a large base of uninsured and underinsured Texans.

Typically, competition forces separate health systems to build and operate facilities in close geographical proximity. The new arrangement will enable participating systems to take advantage of the distribution of their hospitals and other centers across the region.

"We can avoid great duplication of investment and get the opportunity to focus on the right things instead of what competition sometimes requires you to do," Powell explained.

Cost savings could reach \$1 billion over the next five to seven years, officials said. About half that amount could come through avoidance of duplicating new facilities and services in burgeoning population centers, such as the I-35 corridor of far northwest Dallas.

First chaplain endorsed by Alliance of Baptists

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A New Orleans pastoral counselor has become the first chaplain to be endorsed by the Alliance of Baptists.

Ann Madden, who works at the Pastoral Counseling Center in New Orleans, sought endorsement so she can apply to the American Association of Pastoral Counselors, according to the Washington-based Alliance's January newsletter.

She is a graduate of Tulane University and a member of St. Charles Avenue Baptist Church. Her husband, Myron, is also a pastoral counselor.

The 12-year-old moderate Baptist group's board of directors approved a process for endorsing chaplains in September. Ten applicants are nearing completion of the process and two others are before an Alliance endorsement committee, said James Hightower, the committee's chair.

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Bridge on Sea of Galilee to allow pilgrims to 'walk' on water

JERUSALEM (ABP) -- Israel's National Parks Authority has authorized construction of a submerged bridge on the Sea of Galilee which will allow tourists to simulate Jesus' miraculous walk on water.

"In the beginning we thought it was a joke," the authority's head of planning, Zeez Margalit, told the Associated Press.

The wire service quoted the official as saying that after researching the idea and reviewing the plans, he concluded it "would not hurt the feelings of the Christian tourists and it would not be too klitschy, so we decided to go with it."

The span, to be built by a private contractor, will be in place by August, according to the report. It will be at Capernaum, the site where tradition says Jesus' walk on water reported in the Gospels took place. The 13-foot wide, 28-foot long floating bridge will be submerged two inches below the water's surface, and will accommodate up to 50 people. To enhance the effect, it will not have handrails. Lifeguards and boats will be on hand in case a walker slips off.

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More city-bred pastors getting rural educations

By Mark Wingfield

JONESBORO, Texas (ABP) -- When Kevin Hall began talking with the pastor-search committee of Jonesboro Baptist Church west of Waco, Texas, he was surprised to learn an unusual part of the job description.

"You know, our pastor we had before announced our six-man football games at the high school," the committee told him.

Hall had been raised in a pastor's home and thought he knew what to expect in his first student pastorate. But being asked to announce high school football games -- and six-man games at that -- caught him off guard. Such a request certainly didn't fit his city-bred image of what pastors do.

He accepted the rural church's call anyway and jumped right in.

"The first six-man football game I ever saw, I announced," he explained. His only preparation came from the school superintendent, a member of his new flock, who gave him a book of rules for six-man football, along with some tips on what to watch for in referee signals.

While most urban pastors would be thrilled just to be invited to deliver an invocation at a high school football game, Hall quickly learned that things are done differently in the country.

That's a lesson an increasing number of city boys learn as they venture into ministry and land their first pastorates in rural areas.

There is a vast difference between the expectations and operation of rural Baptist churches and urban Baptist churches, explained Gary Farley, a national consultant on rural church issues and director of missions for Pickens Baptist Association in Alabama.

These differences increasingly are magnified as more urban-bred ministers are thrown into rural ministries, he said.

Part of the reason is simple demographics: The majority of members of Southern Baptist churches live in urban areas, but the majority of Southern Baptist churches are in rural areas. That means the pool from which new ministers are being called is skewed toward urban influences, while the pool in which those ministers have most opportunity to serve is heavily rural.

Seminaries are awakening to those demographics. For example, Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University and the Logsdon School of Theology at Hardin-Simmons University will sponsor joint classes this May taught by Farley. His goal will be to help ministerial students understand the complexities of rural ministry -- and how to survive by using instincts they may not have learned in the city.

The urban/rural chasm is wider than most young pastors realize, added a Texas director of missions who asked that his association not be identified by name so he could speak more freely.

"We have guys who come in who have been members of larger churches, not just urban churches," he said. "They come in and project the leadership style and the followship style of the church they have been in onto the rural church. And it doesn't work.

"Normally, they don't stay long enough in the rural church to earn the trust they need to earn in order to become the pastor. They are the preacher, but they are not necessarily the pastor."

Yet small rural churches have a long tradition of giving young Baptist pastors excellent ministry training, said Jan Daehnert, director of bivocational and smaller-church development with the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "This has been ... one great way for young folks to have a chance to serve. It's a great way to begin.

"The unfortunate thing is, in those churches there's often no mentoring," he continued. "If I had it to do over again, I would encourage these students to have some great mentoring with someone first. I would like to reverse the way we start out with these churches."

A better result might come from ministerial students working under the leadership of another pastor or church leader to "get some wisdom and insight" before launching into a rural pastorate, Daehnert said. Contrary to conventional wisdom, leading a small rural congregation may be a "more critical situation" than ministering in an urban setting, he suggested.

Yet all is not lost, both he and other denominational leaders said. Though the green city boys may not help their small rural congregations much, those congregations sometimes teach their "preacher boys" more than they learn in seminary.

Hall said that's definitely been the case with him. After three-and-one-half years with the Jonesboro congregation, he's been taught lessons he couldn't have learned in seminary classes at Truett or from his upbringing in Midland and Longview.

For example, announcing the six-man football games proved to be an excellent outreach opportunity, he said. And he's learned how to be hospitable, acknowledging passing cars and trucks either with a wave or with a subtle lift of the finger off the steering wheel.

He's also learned a thing or two about Christian love and fellowship.

"We've become a family out here faster than you could in another setting," he explained. "I've allowed them to love me, and they've allowed me to love them, and that's made all the difference."

Not least importantly, ministering in a community that doesn't have so much as a blinking yellow light on the highway has taught him to be flexible.

He recalls with laughter the outdoor wedding he performed at which the groom's dog suddenly appeared during the dedicatory prayer. While Hall was praying over the newly married couple, the dog began sniffing around Hall's feet.

He stretched the prayer long enough for a groomsman to pull the dog away, so at least his worst fears weren't realized: "I was scared he was going to lift his leg."

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Rural church wants seminary-trained staff member, but no one will come

By Mark Wingfield

COMANCHE, Texas (ABP) -- Should a seminary degree mean a ticket to a position in a large urban church?

That's the impression members of First Baptist Church in Comanche, Texas, are getting, and it's making them frustrated. The rural church -- located 30 miles from the nearest Wal-Mart -- has been searching for an experienced seminary-trained minister of youth and education for a year and a half.

The central Texas church has had serious conversations about the job with four individuals, yet it remains vacant. The reason, according to Pastor Van Christian, is the church's rural location.

"We've been very serious, we think, with at least four candidates," Christian said. "In all those cases, the overriding factor was where we are."

Three candidates for the position have visited the church, raising hopes in the congregation that a match finally had been found. "But when they got here, they just weren't the least bit interested in coming to Comanche," the pastor said.

Now the strong rural congregation -- averaging 300 people in morning worship and offering a competitive salary and benefits package -- can't even get new seminary graduates to talk with them.

"Out of the last batch of resumes we got from Southwestern Seminary, we contacted five we thought were the best we'd ever seen," Christian said. "All five refused even to interview with us, based solely on location."

That's frustrating to both the congregation and the pastor, who himself holds a Ph.D. from the Fort Worth-based Southern Baptist seminary.

"Some people within the church have really gotten down on the community," Christian explained. "They think we need to lower our standards. Their thought has been nobody good is going to come here. I've tried to shake them of that, but it does get a little depressing for them." Sometimes, it makes Christian question whether young ministers are really listening to the call of God as much as they claim to be.

He recalled losing his patience with one soon-to-be seminary graduate who said he wouldn't consider serving in Comanche. "I asked him about the line on his resume that said, 'I'll go wherever God calls.' I told him I didn't think that was a true statement and he ought to change it."

Many ministers say they'll go wherever God leads, "but that's not true," Christian asserted. "They've set their minds that there are certain places they won't go."

That's an increasing problem as more ministerial candidates come out of larger churches and more urban churches, while thousands of rural churches still seek leadership.

"The guys I know struggle a lot at this point," said Gary Farley, a national consultant on rural church issues and director of missions for Pickens Baptist Association in Alabama. "They're wanting to be faithful to God, and yet they struggle with their family relationships and responsibilities as well."

The problem is not only getting seminary-trained pastors to come to rural settings but also getting them to stay, Farley said. Many view these out-of-the-way churches as a stepping stone to a larger, urban church, he said.

"How God works in all that, I don't think there's any pat answer," Farley said. "Sometimes, guys feel God wants them to stay, and there's other times guys bail out. And there's still other times when God does move them."

City-bred students can face a real struggle about considering a rural church, affirmed Michael Morgan, associate dean of Truett Theological Seminary at Baylor University and former placement officer with Southwestern Seminary.

"I think there is a hesitance sometimes from prospective students who have been raised in a city to go into a rural area," he said. "They don't really know how to live in a rural area."

While about as many Truett students come from small towns as big cities, "we have very few who have truly rural backgrounds," Morgan said. "That was certainly the case at Southwestern too."

Multiple factors make rural ministry appear less appealing in today's urban-driven world, Morgan and Farley said.

Farley recalled the story of a pastor whose wife worked as an engineer at General Dynamics in Fort Worth while he attended seminary. When they accepted a rural pastorate, there was no place for her to find a comparable job. "She struggled with using her God-given abilities," Farley said.

And for most people raised in a city, the slower, more isolated life of the country is daunting, said a Texas director of missions who has dealt with many young pastors leading their first churches.

"A guy who's been in an urban setting and goes to the rural setting will have to deal with loneliness," he said. "You've got nobody to relate to. More than that, the wife does not have anyone to relate to. That can get you into trouble."

Yet rural ministry can be rewarding, according to those who have experienced it. The slower pace and the close-knit communities offer many benefits, they report.

Christian said he understands the feeling some in his congregation have that "no one good wants to come here," but he also bristles at that suggestion sometimes.

And on occasion, he only half-jokingly reminds them, "I wanted to come here."

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Former city pastor blooms in rural congregation

By Mark Wingfield

ERATH COUNTY, Texas (ABP) -- Mike Fritscher never envisioned himself as pastor of a rural Baptist church. Yet he has become one of the most successful country pastors in Texas.

The 39-year-old graduate of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary grew up in a New Orleans suburb, attending a large and growing Baptist congregation. He witnessed on Bourbon Street as a teenager. He spent seven years in an innovative urban youth ministry in Houston.

He entered seminary with a view toward continuing an urban ministry, vowing he never would go back to a traditional church. And then he went to supply one Sunday at Cottonwood Baptist Church in Erath County, which is three miles from the closest town.

By Sunday evening, the congregation of about 25 people -- almost all over the age of 50 -- asked if he would become their pastor.

He agreed, thinking the arrangement would last only 18 months, the amount of time he needed to finish his seminary degree.

That was 14 years ago.

Today, Cottonwood Baptist Church packs in more than 330 people most Sunday mornings. Every chair is filled in the new multi-purpose room built for worship four years ago, and Fritscher wonders where he'll put those who are yet to come.

What made the difference, Fritscher said, is that God intervened in his own life, giving him a new vision for ministry where God had placed him and enabling him to better meet the spiritual needs of his rural flock.

So, when graduation day rolled around at seminary, "I had no leadership to put out a resume," he said. "I began entertaining the thought of what could God do in (to what was, to this New Orleans boy) the middle of nowhere."

That decision to stay, at a time when most young pastors would pack up and leave for a larger church, set the stage for further development.

Within a year, "God did a remarkable work in my life," Fritscher said. "I died to a lot of stuff, the 'bigger and better' mentality."

Money and power tempt some pastors, but that was not Fritscher's problem, he said. "My dream was not making money or living in big houses. My dream was to pastor big churches."

During a time of intense spiritual searching, however, he said, "God set me free" from that desire.

"I began to see the gospel as more than just getting folks to make a decision, but to change lives," he said. "I started preaching that, and people started coming."

His preaching, he said, became more dependent upon Scripture and less dependent upon his own illustrations. And his theme became that "salvation is more than a one-time shot, it's being conformed to the image of God."

People began coming to his office to learn more about his messages. Then more people began coming to worship services. In time, the church slowly began to grow, not only in numbers but also in spiritual maturity and love, Fritscher said.

The story of Cottonwood's transformation from a church barely keeping the doors open to one barely fitting everyone inside the doors revolves around themes of time, love and tenderness.

Plenty of changes have been made, but none quickly. For example, the congregation today sings a combination of hymns and choruses, accompanied by drums and keyboards. But the changes in musical styles were introduced little by little.

"One week we would introduce one chorus, along with five hymns, and we'd do that for a few months. Then we'd move to two choruses and three hymns and do that for a few months," Fritscher explained. "The transition was slow."

But because the transition was slow, few people were run off and more people were brought in, the pastor said. The church's worship leader remains the same woman who has led music at the church for 46 years. Her 36-year-old son continues as the pianist, a role he has filled since he was 10 years old.

The church also has experienced a major shift in the focus of its Sunday night activities, but that, too, has occurred over a seven-year period.

On the first and third Sunday nights of each month, the congregation meets in home fellowships. On the fourth Sunday night they gather at the church for the Lord's Supper.

The home fellowships, an adaptation of something Fritscher learned working in Houston, take place in various small communities around Dublin. Currently, 180 people are involved in five home fellowship groups, with plans to add two more groups by the end of this year.

That compares to 40 people who attended the old Sunday night worship service.

The result of this more intimate discipleship strategy is that "folks are becoming stronger in their faith," Fritscher said. "And there is more lifestyle evangelism taking place now."

Growth at Cottonwood hasn't been explosive and hasn't occurred overnight. But by baptizing 25-30 people per year and renewing the faith of others who were inactive in other churches or who moved into the area, the church has seen steady growth.

And in a way, that's a metaphor for the very thing Fritscher has been preaching -- that the gospel is not just about a one-time experience but rather is about a lifelong journey to be more like Jesus.

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