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- Ranks of 'unchurched' growing, Barna says
- Baptist churches reclaiming independence, leaders say
- Churches can benefit from dialogue, author says
- Texas pastors elected leaders of seminary board
- Leaders encourage BCE to create pan-Baptist network
- New Web site to offer digital church resources
- Harry Blackmun, retired Supreme Court justice, dies

Ranks of 'unchurched' growing, Barna says

By Marv Knox

VENTURA, Calif. (ABP) -- The percentage of "unchurched" Americans is on the rise, despite heightened interest in spirituality, a new poll by religion researcher George Barna shows.

Almost one-third of U.S. adults -- about 65 million people -- have not attended a Christian church service during the past six months, other than a special event such as a wedding, funeral or holiday, according to a nationwide survey conducted by Barna Research Group of Ventura, Calif.

By that definition, the survey found that 31 percent of American adults are unchurched. That is a 4-percent increase in 18 months, meaning the unchurched population grew by 8 million people in just a year and a half, Barna said.

Baby busters, men and non-white adults accounted for much of the increase, researchers said.

The recent survey found 39 percent of baby busters -- young adults born since the early 1960s -- are unchurched, up from 31 percent previously. The number of unchurched men grew from 33 percent to 40 percent. A growing percentage of non-white adults are unchurched -- 30 percent, up from 22 percent.

Results varied by region. The South showed the greatest shift, with 26 percent of residents unchurched, up from 19 percent. Increases also were registered in the Northeast (39 percent, up from 34 percent) and the West (38 percent, up from 34 percent). Only the Midwest, with 26 percent unchurched, remained stable.

Barna noted several factors distinguishing the unchurched segment of the population from church-going Americans.

For example, almost 40 percent of people in the Northeast and West are unchurched, compared to about 25 percent of Southerners and Midwesterners.

Men are 67 percent more likely to be unchurched than are women. Forty percent of men and 24 percent of women unchurched.

Political liberals are twice as likely as conservatives to refrain from church, with 54 percent of liberals unchurched, compared to 21 percent of conservatives.

Singles are more likely to be unchurched than are married people. Forty percent of never-married adults are unchurched, as are 37 percent of adults who currently are divorced. That compares to 26 percent of married people who are unchurched.

Younger people also are more likely to be unchurched. Forty percent of people age 18 to 29 are unchurched. The unchurched percentage decreases as people age -- 37 percent for people in their 30s, 27 percent for the 40s, 25 percent for people from 50 to 64 and 24 percent for adults age 65 or older.

Education also appears to influence church participation. Thirty-seven percent of college graduates are unchurched, compared to 29 percent of adults who never graduated from high school, 30 percent of high-school graduates who never attended college and 28 percent of high-school graduates who attended but did not earn a college degree.

A large number of Americans claim Christian affiliation, even though they don't attend a church, Barna said.

For example, 62 percent of unchurched adults describe themselves as Christians, the survey showed. Slightly more than one-third (35 percent) say they have made a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that still is important to them.

One in seven unchurched Americans meets Barna's criteria for a born-again Christian. For the purposes of his surveys, he defines born-again Christians as people who have made a personal commitment to Christ and who believe they will have eternal salvation based solely on their acceptance of God's grace through Jesus' death and resurrection.

The number of unchurched, born-again Christians is about 10 million, Barna reported.

Despite not attending worship, many unchurched adults "integrate religious activities into their lifestyle," Barna said. Ten percent of them read the Bible each week, 8 percent listen to Christian radio weekly and 20 percent watch religious television monthly.

Unchurched Americans' religious beliefs "represent an inconsistent patchwork of perspectives," Barna observed. For example:

- 22 percent believe the Bible is totally accurate in all that it teaches.

- 67 percent say Satan is not a living being but a symbol of evil.

- 62 percent believe a good person can earn his or her way into heaven.

- 47 percent think Christ committed sins while on earth.

- 49 percent define God as an entity "other than the perfect, all-powerful, all-knowing Creator of the universe who continues to rule his creation today."

The survey's findings show that "Americans feel tremendous freedom to construct their own religious perspectives and practices, regardless of traditions and time-honored teachings," Barna said. "It is amazing that we live in a period during which people are more interested in spirituality than at any time in the past half century, yet they are seeking answers to their spiritual questions and needs from sources other than Christian churches.

"The American public is sending a clear message to Christian leaders: Make Christianity accessible and practical or don't expect their participation."

Barna said churches could benefit from giving serious focus to the challenge of reaching the unchurched.

"If the total unchurched population were to be decreased by just 1 percentage point -- down to 30 percent -- that would bring an additional 2 million adults into Christian churches," he said.

“If those 2 million newcomers were divided evenly among all the Protestant and Catholic churches in America, each congregation would grow by six people,” Barna continued. “That’s more growth than the average congregation has seen in a long time.”

-30-

Baptist churches reclaiming independence, leaders say

By Kenny Byrd

FALLS CHURCH, Va. (ABP) -- Baptist churches are reclaiming their autonomy and rejecting a reliance on national bodies, speakers said at a discussion on the future of denominationalism March 7 in Falls Church, Va.

Columbia Baptist Church and The John Leland Center sponsored the panel discussion on “The Future of Denominationalism in the New Millennium” for Theological Studies.

William O’Brien, director of The Global Center at Samford University’s Beeson Divinity School, predicted that denominations will not die but denominationalism would diminish in the next millennium. Denominationalism, he said, is “reflected in those attitudes and actions that put the work of the denomination above the work of the church.”

O’Brien said denominations at their best have been servants of the local church and predicted that they “will stick around,” even as the lines of denominationalism blur.

O’Brien said the local church is “reclaiming” the initiative on missions and no longer relying on national bodies. “I think the last frontier of missions is not geographic; it is the frontier of collaboration,” O’Brien said. “I personally believe the Spirit of God is up to something.”

Michael Clingenpeel, editor of Religious Herald, newsweekly of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, said churches are moving back “to where we should have been.” He described an “enormous wind of freedom, where churches feel the power to be where they feel God wants them to be.”

Clingenpeel said churches are exercising the autonomy that Baptists have always claimed, but it has led to conflict. In Texas and Virginia, he noted, conservative Baptists have formed their own state associations out of frustration with the moderate-leaning leadership of the state conventions. Clingenpeel said those moves have “doubled the bureaucracy” by creating two state conventions within one state.

Clingenpeel compared the Southern Baptist Convention to a religious corporation in which the churches were local franchises. “Increasingly, this kind of franchising is no longer occurring. Independent churches are beginning to reclaim their autonomy and act like Baptists,” he said.

Clingenpeel said one of the most important developments in Virginia is the development of alliances among churches and a variety of other Christian, but not necessarily Baptist, entities. The alliances are going to increase, he said, noting that it is “very frustrating” to denominational bodies when churches begin to align with such groups.

Panelists said they were not surprised when an audience member associated with the National Association of Evangelicals said Southern Baptist leaders had refused to join the NAE, because they did not want to belong to anything they could not control. The NAE is an evangelical Christian association of more than 43,000 churches, 74 denominations and other organizations and individuals promoting religious freedom.

James Leo Garrett Jr., retired theology professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas, said Clingenpeel’s franchise analogy is accurate, but “it was a corruption” of the original intent of the Baptist denomination.

He listed several historical movements that have impacted denominationalism, including Landmarkism; the 1920s fundamentalist/modernist controversy; the ecumenical movement; the civil rights movement; Vatican Council II; the Pentecostal movement; biblical inerrancy; the split between Protestant mainliners and evangelicals; and the growth of mega-churches.

One audience member asked the panelists why many churches had moved to remove "Baptist" from their names.

Clingenpeel said some see the term Baptist as a "liability" more than an "asset," citing 20 years of fighting within the Southern Baptist denomination.

"Baptists have an image problem these days," Clingenpeel said.

As a humorous example, Clingenpeel read a personal newspaper advertisement recently brought to his attention. A single woman seeking a single man concluded the ad by saying, "Overweight okay but no slobs, smokers, drinker, convicts or Baptists."

Garrett said that putting "Baptist" in a church name does not mean the church promotes Baptist principles. "If we're not forming Baptists, then it does not matter what you put on that label."

Responding to a question about the future of Baptists state papers, Clingenpeel said many papers have ceased carrying news and become "public-relations entities for their own state convention." He predicted that papers will stay around but will take a different shape through electronic publishing, niche publications and possibly some alliances formed between state papers.

Clingenpeel also voiced concern about how pastors will be trained in the future because the "current matrix of seminaries" is not doing an effective job of preparing pastors to lead post-modern churches.

Responding to a question about which Baptist principles are most important to pass on to the next generation, O'Brien listed religious liberty and the appropriate relationship between church and state, as well as the ability to collaborate and cooperate with others.

Clingenpeel said, "I would like us to carry on the notion that everyone is competent before God," calling soul competency the "hub of who we are."

Garrett said Baptists need to keep congregational polity and noted that in many cases Baptists "have not modeled well that which we claim as important in Baptist life."

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Churches can benefit from dialogue, author says

By Pat Cole

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Churches can experience more understanding and less controversy through dialogue, according to a Baptist pastor and author of a recent book.

While dialogue may not always resolve conflict, it can help people on both sides to better appreciate opposing views and enable them to manage their differences, Joe Phelps, author of "More Light, Less Heat," said at a board meeting of the Baptist Center for Ethics.

Ethics leaders from three state Baptist conventions and Cooperative Baptist Fellowship coordinators from three states joined BCE directors at the March 8-9 meeting at Woodmont Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn.

Phelps defined dialogue as "an ongoing conversation between Christians of differing convictions who recognize the human limitations in the positions they hold and who believe that God can use the disagreements to teach and grow the church."

Phelps, pastor of Highland Baptist Church in Louisville, Ky., said he wrote the book specifically for Christians, because they have a “a God resource” not available to others.

Dialogue is not the same as debate, which places people in a win/lose situation, Phelps said. Nor is it equivalent to mediation, which attempts to resolve a dispute. Instead, dialogue “is about growing and deepening your own understanding,” he said.

Disputes based on factual disagreements are different from those rooted in philosophical differences, Phelps said. “In factual questions, the opposite of factual truth is an error,” he said. “The opposite of a profound truth is another profound truth.”

By engaging in dialogue about differences in philosophy, people can begin to understand truth from other vantage points, Phelps said. He said people must enter such dialogue with humility and be able to identify the good points of adversarial positions.

Phelps acknowledged that dialogue can be tedious and takes patience. “Dialogue works best on issues when a decision does not have to be made quickly or even ever,” he said.

-30-

Texas pastors elected leaders of seminary board

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Three Texas pastors have been elected to leadership posts among the trustees of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Retired Fort Worth pastor Miles Seaborn, an organizer of the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention, was elected chairman of the trustee board March 9.

A former missionary and former pastor of Birchman Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Seaborn has been acting chairman of the seminary’s trustees since chairman Ollin Collins resigned from the board last October amid allegations of sexual misconduct at the church where he was pastor. Seaborn was elected vice chairman last year.

This year Seaborn will work alongside Michael Dean, pastor of Travis Avenue Baptist Church in Fort Worth, who was elected vice chairman, and Matthew McKellar, pastor of Sylvania Baptist Church in Tyler, who was elected secretary.

During their March 8-10 meeting on the Fort Worth campus, seminary trustees also elected four new faculty members and heard a progress report on the \$100 million “Touch the World ... Impact Eternity” campaign.

In an hour-long session closed to observers, trustees reportedly heard an update on future funding possibilities presented by Harold Riley, an Austin layman who is chairing the fund-raising drive.

A major portion of the campaign is funding construction of the Ralph M. Smith Leadership Development Complex, which already is rising from a vacant lot on the southeast corner of the campus. The facility, which will include guest rooms and conference facilities, is named for the former pastor of Hyde Park Baptist Church in Austin.

President Ken Hemphill told trustees the project’s first two phases will be built now, and a shell for phase three will be constructed but not finished until funding is available. Building a shell for the final phase now rather than later will save about \$1 million, he said.

Hemphill also described challenges the seminary faces in providing adequate student housing and from funding that is not keeping pace with the corresponding increases in costs. He urged trustees to thank the Baptists in their states for supporting the convention's Cooperative Program but explained that even recent increases in seminary funding from the unified budget have not kept pace with the escalating cost of providing education.

At the same time, Southwestern students continue to be charged far less than students at seminaries supported by other denominations, Hemphill said. He cited data from Association of Theological Schools comparing Southwestern's \$2,124 average tuition to \$7,800 annually at non-SBC seminaries.

At the conclusion of their meeting, trustees adopted a statement of appreciation for the Cooperative Program at the suggestion of Ralph Pulley of Dallas.

The statement thanks Southern Baptists for their support of the seminary through the Cooperative Program. Because of Cooperative Program funding, endowment and other seminary funds, students pay less than 30 percent of the cost of their education, reported Hubert Martin, the seminary's vice president for business affairs.

Trustees also unanimously approved a statement of appreciation for Hemphill and his leadership, as well as the efforts of other staff and faculty and students.

The four new faculty members are Michael Barnett, associate professor of missions; George Klein, associate professor of Old Testament; Margaret Lawson, assistant professor of foundations of education; and Stanley Warren, associate professor of voice.

Barnett comes from the SBC's International Mission Board, where he most recently has been administrative associate for Northern Africa and the Middle East.

Klein comes from Criswell College in Dallas, where he has been professor of Old Testament since 1984. He also has served as the college's academic dean and dean of graduate studies

Lawson has taught adjunctively at Southwestern since 1990, as well as teaching at Dallas Baptist University. She previously was minister of discipleship and prayer at Springdale Baptist Church in Fort Worth and director of Southwestern's curriculum center.

Warren comes from Oklahoma Baptist University, where he has been assistant professor of voice and music history since 1997. He also is minister of music and worship at Mayfair Baptist Church in Oklahoma City.

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Leaders encourage BCE to create pan-Baptist network

By Pat Cole

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Baptist Center for Ethics must create an ethics network that includes Baptists from various traditions and regions to adequately address today's pressing ethical issues, BCE leaders said at a meeting of the organization's board.

Robert Parham, executive director of the independent ethics agency based in Nashville, Tenn., said BCE began in 1991 with the idea that it would serve Baptists beyond the moderate Southern Baptist constituency that birthed it. Now that BCE has established a base in the South, it is time for the agency to venture into other regions and include other Baptist groups, Parham said.

The BCE board met March 8-9 at Woodmont Baptist Church in Nashville.

During the meeting, BCE took a step toward broadening its reach by welcoming American Baptist Dwight Stinnett to its board. Stinnett, executive minister of the American Baptist Churches of the Great Rivers Region, and two other board members were asked to speak to the group about their vision for Baptist ethics.

Stinnett said he would like to see BCE tackle issues such as racial, ethnic, language and ideological pluralism; family; ecology; economics and citizenship. All those issues are related to the New Testament theme of the kingdom of God, said Stinnett, whose ABC region includes Missouri and most of Illinois. "It's high time that Baptists rehabilitated the category of the kingdom of God as theologically relevant for the way we live."

Stinnett expressed optimism that a new Baptist ethics network could emerge through BCE. "I have a sneaking suspicion that this could be one of those historic moments in Baptist life, and I am privileged to be a part of it," he said.

BCE produces resources for congregations on moral, ethical and leadership topics and provides commentaries on ethical issues to denominational and secular media. Though its strength is concentrated in the South, BCE's resources have been used by more than 1,200 congregations in 40 states.

In his address, Parham said BCE must continue its "positive, proactive" ethics agenda by steering people toward ethical decision making that moves beyond the "false choices" frequently offered by secular political parties.

Parham said BCE will continue to build its core Southern Baptist constituency, but he added BCE needs more moderate Baptists who will show courage. "How do we get moderate Baptists to stick their necks out for the common good?" asked Parham. "How do we get them to become giraffes rather than turtles."

Board member Ed Hogan, pastor of Jersey Village Baptist Church in Houston, said BCE has a "bright future in Texas." The state's younger ministers, he said, "will invest in proactive ethics."

Another board member, Doug Dortch, pastor of First Baptist Church of Tallahassee, Fla., said BCE faces the challenge of advocating ethical actions in a world that encourages people to ignore rules. People are less inclined to obey the Scripture just for the sake of obedience, he said. Yet he noted that in the Gospel of John Jesus asked that his followers obey his commandments in order to experience joy.

"There is another way and another reason to do what is right," Dortch said. "There is a way to bring together obedience with joy."

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New Web site to offer digital church resources

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Smyth and Helwys Publishing has announced the launch of NextSunday.com, which the company claims is the first online source dedicated exclusively to digital resources for worship and Christian education.

The World Wide Web site offers church resources for download in the "portable digital file," or "PDF" format. Shoppers purchase a license allowing them to make a limited number of copies for use by Sunday-school classes or other groups.

The site is designed to save time and money and provide ministers and teachers a greater choice of resource materials, said a spokesman for the Christian publishing house in Macon, Ga.

“Because of the cost savings for churches, and the wider variety of materials we will be able to offer, we believe NextSunday.com represents the future of resource publishing,” said David Cassidy, project director.

The site was expected to offer 30 resources at launch, mostly in the teaching area, and add products each week, surpassing 200 by the end of 1999, according to a news release.

A sample study of five lessons on Jesus in Galilee costs \$11, according to the Web site, compared to an estimated \$24 price tag for the same material produced in the traditional way.

The site can be found at <www.nextsunday.com>

-30-

-- By ABP staff

Harry Blackmun, retired Supreme Court justice, dies

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Retired U.S. Supreme Court Justice Harry Blackmun, best known for writing the landmark 1973 Roe vs. Wade abortion rights decision, died March 4 at the age of 90.

Blackmun, who retired in 1994 after a quarter century of service on the high court, died at a hospital in Arlington, Va.

He was appointed to the Supreme Court by President Richard Nixon in 1970 and before that served 10 years on the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals.

While he was most frequently identified with the controversial 1973 decision recognizing women's right to privacy in abortion decisions, his colleagues on the bench, as well as court watchers, paid tribute to his broader judicial role.

“His legacy obviously includes Roe v. Wade,” said Justice Stephen Breyer at a March 9 memorial service at Metropolitan United Methodist Church in Washington. “Harry said, ‘We all pick up tabs. I’ll carry that one to my grave.’”

“But momentous as that decision was, it hardly captures the full range of Harry’s Supreme Court accomplishments,” added Breyer, who replaced Blackmun on the Supreme Court.

Since the 7-2 decision the Supreme Court has permitted some restrictions on abortion but has refused to overturn Roe vs. Wade.

Noting that Blackmun authored more than 350 high court opinions, Chief Justice William Rehnquist said the publicity associated with the Roe vs. Wade decision “may have obscured many other important decisions he authored.”

Justice Sandra Day O’Connor said Blackmun “was a brilliant, meticulous and thoughtful man. He brought a personal dimension to his work and exhibited a genuine concern for doing justice in each case before him.”

Blackmun’s colleagues also recognized his concern for the impact of the law on ordinary citizens.

At the memorial service, Breyer praised Blackmun’s effort “to understand the individual human beings whose lives his opinions would affect.”

Noting that Blackmun kept in his office a list of 27 human needs such as truth, clarity, courage, faith, sense of humor and compassion, Breyer said, “He lived that list.”

Religious-liberty organizations gave Blackmun high marks for protecting the free exercise of religion and church-state separation.

“Justice Blackmun was one of the Supreme Court’s great advocates of church-state separation and freedom of conscience,” said Barry Lynn executive director of Americans United for Separation of Church and State.

The Establishment Clause, Blackmun said in a 1987 address, was “designed in part to ensure that the advancement of religion comes only from the voluntary effort of its proponents and not from support by the state. Religious groups are to prosper or perish on the intrinsic merit and attraction of their beliefs and practices.”

Baptist Joint Committee General Counsel Brent Walker noted that Blackmun was a “devout Christian and a dedicated Methodist layman.”

“His legal acumen was equaled by his capacity to love people and care about how the law impacted their daily lives,” Walker said.

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