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Alliance of Baptists celebrates founding of Richmond seminary

By Bob Allen

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Commemorating the 10th anniversary of a controversial vote to launch an independent seminary for moderate Southern Baptists, the Alliance of Baptists met in Richmond, Va., for its 13th annual convocation, March 12-14.

Established March 2, 1989, in Greenville, S.C., by a vote of what was then called the Southern Baptist Alliance, Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond opened in 1991 with 31 students in rented classrooms. Today it has 250 students, 14 elected faculty and occupies a permanent campus building purchased for \$1.9 million in 1995 and recently remodeled into offices, classrooms and a dormitory.

In a ceremony celebrating the 10th anniversary of that vote, BTSR President Tom Graves recalled how the recommendation to launch the seminary was nearly withdrawn because of a "very heated discussion" during which it appeared the motion would be voted down.

"There was strong disagreement, particularly from those associated with other seminaries in Southern Baptist life," said Graves, who at the time was a pastor in Charlotte, N.C., and chairman of a theological-education committee that presented the proposal.

Instead, a motion came from the floor to cancel a series of workshops and continue the discussion into the next hour. During a second round, discussion was calmer, and the measure eventually passed by a 92 percent majority, Graves recalled.

"BTSR is possible because of the dreams of the good folks of the Alliance," Graves said.

A group of moderates had formed the Alliance two years earlier to defend principles they felt were under attack by conservatives then gaining control of the Southern Baptist Convention. Among those concerns was a loss of "academic freedom" at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary after conservatives gained a majority on the North Carolina school's trustee board in 1987.

The Alliance's board of directors responded by setting up a fund for alternative theological education and appointing the seminary task force. Some moderates, however, argued that a new seminary was unnecessary, because other Southern Baptist seminaries were still controlled by moderates, primarily Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Over time, however, each of the six SBC seminaries went conservative, and a crop of alternative theology schools emerged. Since the vote to establish the Richmond seminary, new seminaries or divinity schools have opened at Mercer, Baylor, Hardin-Simmons, Campbell, Gardner-Webb and Wake Forest universities and Baptist-studies programs at Duke, Emory, Texas Christian and American universities. One American Baptist seminary, Central Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Kan., has also experienced growth by appealing to moderate Southern Baptists.

Most of the new schools are supported by the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, another moderate Baptist splinter group that formed in 1991. With nearly 1,500 contributing churches, the Fellowship is larger and more geographically diverse than the older Alliance, which lists 51 affiliated churches and is strongest on the East Coast.

The Alliance also has gained a reputation as being the more liberal group, confronting issues including ecumenism and homosexuality, while the Fellowship has taken a centrist stance and emphasized traditional causes like missions, and theological education.

Stan Hastey, whose election as executive director of the Washington-based Alliance also took place at the 1989 convocation, said the Richmond seminary "is Exhibit A of the Alliance's propensity for dreaming dreams and planting seeds" and then turning projects over for others to nurture and grow.

"The Alliance alone could not have birthed this school," Hastey said.

In a business session at Richmond's Northminster Baptist Church, this year's convocation voted to establish a fund to support a Founder's Day program at BTSR that would give focus to the Alliance's role in founding the seminary. The initial goal for the fund is \$20,000.

Addressing a theological-education theme that ran through this year's meeting, Alliance president Welton Gaddy urged the convocation crowd to "think theologically."

"We need to give evidence of being recipients of theological education," said Gaddy, executive director of the Washington-based Interfaith Alliance and preaching pastor at Northminster Baptist Church in Monroe, La.

Gaddy said he used to think that Baptists who opposed theological education did so out of honest conviction, but now he wonders "if people who are afraid of theological education are really afraid of losing control over people's minds."

"Thinking is a way of loving God," Gaddy said. "Thinking is a way of serving God. God delights in sound thinking."

In this year's "covenant" address, Hartford Seminary sociologist Nancy Ammerman said groups like the Alliance allow Baptist churches to remain connected by common traditions and cooperative work without being "carbon copies" of one another.

"Part of what it means to connect to being Baptist is to connect to that larger theological and historical tradition," Ammerman said. "For much of the last century we have depended on the Sunday-school lesson and seminary professors and traveling evangelists and a variety of other things to tell us what it means to be a Baptist."

"One of the things that has happened to us in the last decade or so is we have discovered a new freedom to do theology from the ground up," she said.

In other business, Alliance members:

-- Authorized the president to appoint a "committee on ordination" to offer services to churches such as sitting on ordination councils or assisting in ordination services.

Local associations usually offer such services, but some Alliance congregations have poor relations with nearby, more conservative, churches. Alliance directors said there is historical precedent in early groups like the Philadelphia Baptist Association, which related to churches across a broad geographic area in the 1700s.

The Alliance will not initiate or conduct ordinations, but simply offer itself as a resource to local churches that initiate the ordination process, Gaddy said.

Having a role in ordination would help the Alliance in its pending application for membership in the National Council of Churches, leaders said, adding that was only a minor consideration in bringing the recommendation.

- Authorized a team for formal dialogue with the United Church of Christ to report findings and recommendations at both Alliance and UCC meetings in 2001.

- Approved a citation "blessing" Michael Hester's ministry as a pastoral counselor. Hester, a former Baptist seminary professor who now lives in Asheville, N.C., recently transferred his church affiliation and ordination to the United Church of Christ but said he desires to retain some tie with his Baptist roots.

- Set the weekend following Easter as a fixed date for future convocations and approved dates and sites for April 27-29, 2000, in Austin, Texas; April 20-22, 2001, in Atlanta; and April 4-6, 2002, in Winston-Salem, N.C.

- Approved Alliance endorsement of military chaplains, with the understanding there will be an ongoing study of church-state and peace-and-justice implications.

- Endorsed an upcoming PBS program, "Facing the Truth with Bill Moyers," on South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission.

- "Received with gratitude" a report by a work group on ecology entitled "Care for the Earth: An Invitation to Reflection and Action."

- Adopted a statement criticizing U.S. policy toward Cuba.

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Upward Basketball scoring points with churches and kids alike

By Mark Wingfield

AMARILLO, Texas (ABP) -- Kids often idolize professional athletes, but one young participant in this year's Upward Basketball League in Amarillo, Texas, found a higher star.

The elementary-age boy was so proud of the "Upword" version of the Bible he received from his coach that he slept with it under his pillow. The special paperback Scripture publication contained photos and Christian testimonies from prominent basketball stars like A.C. Green of the Dallas Mavericks.

"I really like this," the boy told his mother. "I don't know what's going on, but I think I want to be a Christian."

This story, recounted by Upward Basketball leader Jordan Cox, illustrates what he and others describe as the purpose of the fast-growing franchise based in local churches. That purpose is not only to teach first- through sixth-graders the fundamentals of basketball but to use sports as a means to teach the children and their families about God.

Cox, minister of recreation at First Baptist Church in Amarillo, recalls the moment he recognized the need for such a league. He was listening to Upward's founder, Caz McCaslin, ask a series of questions about the existing basketball programs in most communities.

"Are the kids in those leagues getting good quality coaching?" McCaslin asked. Cox and others in the room said they assumed so.

“Are the kids in those leagues learning basketball?” Again, the crowd muttered their assumption that was true.

“Is anybody in those leagues sharing Christ with them?”

At that moment, “you could have heard a pin drop” in the room full of recreation ministers and youth leaders, Cox said.

Now, after his first season leading an Upward Basketball league in Amarillo, Cox said he has seen first-hand the need for a church-based league with the qualities offered by Upward. His church’s joint effort with Coulter Road Baptist Church attracted 400 boys and girls, including perhaps 80 who don’t attend any church.

“We know for sure we’ve had five families join our church” as a direct result of the basketball league, Cox said.

The same has been true at North Richland Hills Baptist Church in Fort Worth, where Gregg Wisecarver is minister of activities.

“God is working through this,” he said. “It has swept through our church, and the excitement is here.”

“The doors to the gym are the least threatening in the whole church,” he said. “People will come in the gym who would never come to church.”

“If you approached the average family on the street and said we as a church want to be able to come into your doors twice a week and share God’s plan for you, most people would say you’re crazy,” Wisecarver continued. “But you throw a round leather ball in the mix, and they give you permission.”

This combination of sports and evangelism makes Upward Basketball unique even among other church-based sports leagues.

Churches that participate in the Upward program receive step-by-step instructions for recruiting players and coaches, teaching kids the game and recognizing each child throughout the season. They also are coached on how to present awards in a way that both builds self-confidence in the players and gives a clear presentation of the gospel.

The awards program is the high point of the season -- and the culmination of eight weeks of ministry. Most Upward Basketball awards programs include lots of awards for players, sports entertainment for the whole family and a keynote speaker who spells out what it means to be a Christian. Players, their parents and guests are given opportunity to register spiritual decisions.

In many cases, the results leave even league organizers astonished.

Lakeland Baptist Church in Lewisville, Texas, for example, saw 156 children and adults give written affirmation of a first-time commitment to Jesus Christ at the church's Upward awards night.

McCaslin, at the time a recreation minister at a Baptist church in Spartanburg, S.C., created Upward Basketball in 1986. When the program in his church grew to involve 700 kids each year, in 1995 he began packaging the training and materials so other churches could run leagues of their own.

Upward Basketball has grown from seven churches reaching 1,300 that year to 253 churches reaching 50,000 kids this year, said Shane McKenzie, director of communications for Upward Unlimited. He predicts 500 churches will sponsor Upward leagues next winter and will draw in 100,000 players.

The leagues range in size from fewer than 100 players to more than 800. Church leaders who’ve run the program say it works well in churches of all sizes regardless of whether they have an existing recreation ministry or not.

The win-at-all-costs mentality that parents hate about many sports leagues is missing from Upward Basketball.

That’s because Upward leagues begin with some ground rules few other leagues endorse. For example, every child is guaranteed to play in at least half of each game, regardless of ability. No league standings are kept, and games for first- and second-graders aren't even scored.

At Upward games, you're as likely to hear parents cheering for goals made by an opponent as for their own child's team. And when a referee whistles a player for a violation, he's likely to bend down and make sure the child understands how to correct the problem in the future.

This emphasis comes in part through pre-packaged materials for league directors, coaches, parents and players, all published through a partnership between Upward Unlimited and LifeWay Christian Resources.

Each player is charged a registration fee of \$45 to \$55, which covers all the league expenses. Upward Unlimited provides the manuals, color brochures for recruiting players, the "Upword" Bible for players, a handbook for players, a reversible mesh jersey, a T-shirt and an award for each player at the end of the season. This year's award was a regulation-size basketball imprinted with the Upward Basketball logo.

Upward Unlimited also supplies league leaders with ideas for the devotionals to be given by coaches at the mid-point of each week's hour-long practice and by others at the half time of each game.

The Upward program also places a heavy emphasis on spiritual support through prayer. Each league is asked to appoint a "prayer commissioner" who will enlist 100 people to pray daily for the league and its participants.

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Church with no recreation minister reaches 800 kids through basketball

By Mark Wingfield

LEWISVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- Before Upward Basketball, Lakeland Baptist Church in Lewisville, Texas, was a church with a gym but no recreation ministry.

After three seasons of Upward Basketball, the suburban Dallas church has involved hundreds of boys and girls in its basketball league and led more than 400 children and adults to faith in Jesus Christ.

"The results have been incredible," said Stan Cole, a layman who heads the Upward league.

"There are a lot of gyms sitting out there [in churches] that are not used very much for recreational evangelism," Cole said. "Our gym was that way. It was used for Sunday-school department assemblies, banquets and maybe once or twice a year for a drama. When I went in and looked around that gym, I could only find one or two basketballs that would hold any air."

This winter, however, basketballs full of air and children full of excitement filled the air in Lakeland's gym, where dozens of Upward Basketball games were played each weekend and an equal number of practices were held on weeknights.

The church, with an average Sunday attendance of 1,000, ministered to 3,000 children, parents, siblings and grandparents during the eight-week Upward Basketball season.

Lakeland's Upward league, which registered more than 800 players this season, is perhaps the largest in the nation. And the church doesn't even have a paid recreation minister.

The first profession of faith in Christ known to have resulted from Lakeland's Upward league was the father of two young players who had told his wife he never would go to any church.

"He came to sign up his two sons for Upward Basketball," Cole recalled. "When he came and saw the organization, he felt led to sign up to coach. We allow non-church members to serve as assistant coaches."

Through the witness of the team's coach and others involved in the league, this skeptical father's distaste for Christianity was overcome. "By week six, he was baptized," Cole said.

"Here's a dad I don't know how many years it would have taken to reach, but through sports ministry he became very interested in the gospel."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For a list of churches in your state or city that sponsored Upward Basketball leagues this year, visit the Upward Unlimited Web site at www.upward.org. Click on the area for information about playing Upward Basketball, then go to the map and select your state.

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