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**Virginia Baptists to study ties
with University of Richmond**

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- Ties between Virginia Baptists and the University of Richmond will be examined by a task force named April 13 in response to the university's decision to add sexual orientation to its non-discrimination policy.

The seven-member task force was created by the Virginia Baptist Mission Board's executive committee, which asked board chairman Gene Watson to name four of the panel's members. The board's committee on student ministries selected another three members.

The task force's findings will be presented at the mission board's Oct. 12-13 meeting. Based on that report, the mission board may choose to bring recommendations to the Baptist General Association of Virginia at its annual meeting, scheduled Nov. 9-10 in Richmond.

Trustees of the University of Richmond expanded the school's non-discrimination policy March 5 to prohibit discrimination against gays and lesbians in student, faculty and staff recruitment and promotion.

University officials said the decision merely formalizes a long-standing practice. Trustee Lewis Booker, in a letter to the Baptist newspaper Religious Herald, maintained the new policy "does not in any way approve or advocate a [homosexual] lifestyle."

Last year, Virginia Baptists adopted a statement "affirming the biblical teaching that homosexual behavior is sinful and unacceptable to Christians," while offering guidelines for expressing "Christ-like compassion for homosexual persons."

Three years ago several churches separated from the BGAV to form a separate state convention, which now numbers about 150 congregations. One stated rationale for starting the new Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia was a charge that the BGAV is too soft in its stance against homosexuality. The conservative group continues to repeat the charge in efforts to recruit new churches.

In a statement to the BGAV mission board April 13, Executive Director Reginald McDonough said he applauds the university's commitment to non-discrimination. "However, I feel that making this public pronouncement goes a step beyond non-discrimination to affirm a lifestyle which I and many other Virginia Baptists believe does not square with biblical teachings," he said.

McDonough acknowledged the right of the university's trustees to make decisions "they feel are in the best interest of the school." But, he added, "Virginia Baptists must act in accord with our value system."

Any change in the relationship between the University of Richmond and the Baptist denomination that founded it 169 years ago would not be a simple matter, warned McDonough. The two continue to be linked in a variety of ways:

- Four of the school's 40 trustees are nominated by the BGAV.

- The BGAV allocates about \$230,000 to UR, most of which funds the Virginia Baptist Scholars Program. Sixteen students currently are recipients of that program, which provides financial aid for students from churches affiliated with the BGAV.

- The Virginia Baptist Historical Society maintains its headquarters and library on the campus in facilities provided by the university at no cost.

- A partnership agreement negotiated by representatives of the BGAV and of UR governs the relationship between the two, similar to agreements between Virginia Baptists and their other educational and benevolent agencies.

- The university's chaplain and associate chaplain are Baptists.

"How can we express our autonomy and still maintain a ministry relationship?" McDonough asked. "From my perspective, I feel it is important for Virginia Baptists to maintain a presence and ministry among the university community. We must not abandon those who will be the future leaders of the church and society. However, I feel it absolutely necessary that we find ways to express in clear terms the autonomous nature and mission of the two entities."

During their meeting, mission board members adopted a resolution pledging "support and prayer" for McDonough "in light of the difficult choices ahead." They also promised to pray for the task force, "asking the Lord's wisdom to discern his way as we seek to define the path of the future relationship" between the school and Virginia Baptists.

Margaret Wayland of Danville, Va., a former president of the Baptist General Association of Virginia and of Virginia Woman's Missionary Union, will chair the task force. Wayland, a graduate of the University of Richmond, is a member of West Main Baptist Church in Danville.

Others members named by Watson are Jim Baucom Jr., pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., and a former BGAV first vice president; Jerry Holcomb, pastor of Kings Grant Baptist Church in Virginia Beach, Va., and a former BGAV president; and Ray Spence, pastor of Second Baptist Church in Richmond and chairman of the BGAV budget committee.

Members representing the student-services committee are its chairman, Keith Smith, pastor of University Baptist Church in Charlottesville, Va.; Franklin Cain, a retired school administrator from Richmond and member of Chamberlayne Baptist Church in Richmond; and Don Davidson, pastor of Mount Hermon Baptist Church in Danville.

Reproduction technology creating ethical dilemmas, ethicist says

By Ken Camp

COPPER CANYON, Texas (ABP) -- In an era when couples shop for sperm on the Internet, the ability to help young adults deal ethically with parenting issues will increasingly distinguish churches that are "useful" from those that are not, said Glenn McGee of the University of Pennsylvania's Center for Bioethics.

The "birds-and-bees" story means nothing to a generation that sees reproduction and family more in terms of "ants and termites" or "dogs and cats," McGee recently told the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission and its board of consultants.

McGee, who grew up in Seventh and James Baptist Church in Waco, and his father, Dan McGee of Baylor University, discussed ethical issues related to genetics and parenting during the commission's April 15-16 meeting at Briarwood Retreat Center, near Denton.

"What does it mean to be family when the birds-and-bees story doesn't fit?" McGee asked.

Many in the under-25 generation who have been reared by more than two parents -- often in multiple households -- will associate more with the colonies of ants and termites than with a metaphor based on the nuclear family.

As fertility drugs make quintuplets and sextuplets more common, young people may turn to an analogy like a litter of household pets. Or as designer sperm and designer eggs grow more common, they may even think in terms of breeding racehorses.

"There has been a revolution in reproductive technology," McGee said. That technology has advanced exponentially in the last 10 years, from in-vitro fertilization to genetic mapping and cloning.

The number of genetic tests has grown from 85 to 890, but the number of genetic counselors has not kept pace, he observed.

Due largely to the growth of managed health care, genetic tests increasingly are being performed by general medical practitioners rather than by costly specialists.

Since non-specialists are performing the medical procedures, couples increasingly will come to churches for counseling on issues related to infertility and alternative approaches to becoming parents.

"What does it mean to be infertile? The cure offered is to give you a different kind of child. It doesn't fix the equipment. It's not a cure for the dysfunction," he said.

Once a couple gets "under the hood" trying to fix the problem of childlessness through reproductive technology, new ethical dilemmas arise, McGee said. If the goal is to make a baby that looks like the parents, and if science makes that kind of designer reproduction possible, what's to prevent the prospective parents from also wanting to choose the baby's IQ or personality type?

If reproductive practices are ever regulated, it will more likely come from the civil courts than the legislature, McGee said. He predicted a rise in lawsuits based on "failure of expectations" when designer babies do not turn out as their parents envisioned.

Churches and individual Christians should approach the revolution in reproductive technology with gratitude tempered by caution, the elder McGee advised.

Rather than yielding to a "technological messianism" that promises designer children on demand, he suggested, "We get the kind of children that we want through nurture, education and old-fashioned acts of responsibility."

While approaching technological advances cautiously, Christians should not be paralyzed by fear of the unknown, Dan McGee said.

"We always act without full knowledge of all the consequences," he said. "Life is lived on the slippery slope. There are not many broad, flat lands of absolute moral certainty."

Rather than acting in isolation, couples should be made to feel welcome within churches where there is a shared wisdom and a continuing dialogue on difficult issues, he said.

"We should act in community. This is no job for a Lone Ranger," he said. "We need to create communities of conversation."

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Speakers at Texas conference examine impact of random violence

By Dan Martin

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Joe Williams compares the impact of random violence with flipping a pebble into a pond and watching the ripples eddy out farther and farther from the epicenter.

Williams, a Baptist chaplain, illustrated his point with the story of a young man who had been married only a few months when the Oklahoma City federal building was bombed April 19, 1995.

The man's father-in-law died in the bombing. He stood beside his new wife as she grieved, and he grieved with her. She finally told him she wanted to move back in with her mother and sister because they "understood" what she was going through, and he couldn't.

Reluctantly, he consented. Soon, she asked for a divorce. She then moved to the West Coast in an effort to get as far away as possible from Oklahoma City.

"If it hadn't been for Tim McVeigh I would still be happily married," Williams quoted the young man as saying. "Now Debbie (not her real name) and I will never have the baby we dreamed of having together. All because of him."

Random violence strikes unexpectedly and with horrible ferocity, said Williams and other speakers at a conference on churches' response to random violence. The April event held at First Baptist Church of San Antonio, Texas, was sponsored by the Baptist General Convention of Texas, LifeWay Christian Resources of the Southern Baptist Convention and San Antonio Baptist Association.

Conference speakers included Williams, a Federal Bureau of Investigation chaplain in Oklahoma City, and Bruce Tippit, pastor of First Baptist Church of Jonesboro, Ark.

"Random violence leaves you without a rational basis of response," said Tippit, who ministered in the aftermath of the March 1998 shooting at Jonesboro's Westside Middle School by two boys, ages 11 and 13. "It is random -- without cause and effect -- and it is violence of unimaginable proportions."

Brooks Faulkner, head of the LeaderCare department of LifeWay Christian Resources, offered these guidelines for dealing with random violence:

- Realize that some questions have no answers. He encouraged caregivers not to offer cliché or pat answers to complex issues.

- Help victims understand that all events are not connected. For example, a mother's getting home late did not cause her daughter's abduction and death.

- Help people to not assume blame for bad things they didn't cause. A parent is not to blame for a murdered child, nor is a grieving spouse guilty because his mate has cancer.

- Point people to the "real question," which is "What am I going to do about it?"

"Who does suffering serve?" Faulkner asked. He quoted Dorothee Sowell, the German theologian, who in discussing human response to tragedy drew a distinction between "the devil's martyrs" and "God's martyrs."

"The devil's martyrs force themselves into despair and disbelief," Faulkner said. "God's martyrs give illness room to exist, accept accidents as a fact of life and regard human tragedy as inevitable."

Tommy Mitchell, pastor of First Baptist Church of Pearl, Miss., offered additional suggestions for immediate response after an act of random violence. Mitchell was unable to speak at the conference due to an injury but made his material available.

On Oct. 1, 1997, a teen with a troubled past walked into Pearl High School and opened fire, killing two teenage girls and wounding seven others. He had killed his mother before coming to school.

After that experience, Mitchell wrote materials suggesting ways the church can deal with random violence, which he predicted is "coming to a town near you."

He suggested three immediate responses:

-- Start with the greatest need. For example, are church members directly involved as victims, students, faculty, police, EMS, fire or other officials?

-- Evaluate your capacity to render servant ministries. Could your church be a relief center or shelter, supply food or drink, provide transportation or help with injury notification?

-- "Drop everything else -- everyone else already has."

Mitchell said preachers have a special role in such times, and churches can have special prayer or informal memorial services, but he recommended that pastors "not speak of this event every time they worship."

"There are appropriate times to speak of them and not to speak of them," he said.

Several speakers urged churches to create a crisis-response plan, including organization and budget, development of a media plan, preparation for use of buildings and personnel, and relationships with hospital, law enforcement and first responders.

All the speakers urged caregivers to pay special attention to the effects of tragedy on law-enforcement personnel.

"Law enforcement and other personnel will respond to the crisis in some fashion," Mitchell said. "Some will be visibly angry, others shaken, some sick, some very quiet, some will just shrug it off."

Williams said caregivers in Oklahoma City later experienced suicide, divorce, depression, drinking and drug abuse.

Even many of the dogs that were brought in to look for survivors and bodies after the bombing have died prematurely, he said, because of depression they picked up from their handlers.

"Occasionally we would have to bury a live person in the rubble so the dogs could have a success experience," Williams said.

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Caregivers suffer 'high cost' police chaplain tells Baptists

By Dan Martin

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Caring can extract a high cost, said a chaplain who ministered amid the Oklahoma City bombing.

Joe Williams is a chaplain for the FBI in Oklahoma City. A veteran police chaplain, he was on duty April 19, 1995, when a truck bomb demolished the Alfred Murrah Federal Building.

For 19 days, he worked amid recovery of wounded, dead and body parts from rubble left by the worst act of terrorism in U.S. history.

He described his experience at an April conference on the church and random violence, held at First Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

Williams spoke of the "high cost" of caring, which comes to "people who observe and listen to experiences of pain, grief, suffering and loss -- ministers, emergency responder personnel, therapists and others."

Those in ministry face the additional issue of listening to "the tears, groans, hysteria ... and the questions," he said.

"Ministry people are seen as representatives of God," Williams said. They "are supposed to have the answers. Ministry people are expected to be able to make reason out of the unreasonable, understanding out of chaos and to make sweet the bitter."

But after a while, he said, caregivers experience an overload of care giving.

A new term that has come into use in recent years is "compassion fatigue," Williams said. It is similar to burnout, he said, but is more focused on the results of overload related to care giving.

"When the caregiver takes on too heavy a load of other people's burdens, leaving little time or energy for themselves, they become disillusioned and depressed and often start to show cracks in their professional veneer," Williams said. Compassion-fatigue symptoms include anxiety, numbness, shock, deep disturbance, fatigue, headaches, emotional reactions, irritability and anger, he noted.

Compassion fatigue happens when a caregiver becomes so involved in providing care to others that he or she becomes emotionally and spiritually exhausted, Williams said.

He encouraged caregivers to "practice self-management" and recognize when they are becoming overwhelmed. "Many caregivers, when they find they are overwhelmed, work even harder to keep up, as their bodies, spirits, family life and quality of life suffer."

Williams reminded caregivers that "you do not have to give all of your blood, just transfusions."

Caregivers also must receive care and "find a place where you can squeeze out your emotional sponge," he said. "Re-establish balance and care for yourselves."

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Churches responding to random violence restore what they didn't 'steal,' pastor says

By Dan Martin

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- As Bruce Tippit unfolded the story of the tragedy at Westside Middle School in Jonesboro, Ark., his calm retelling contrasted sharply with the horror of the March 24, 1998, act of random violence which left five dead and 10 injured.

"An event the size of this tragedy is similar to being drawn in the vortex of a whirlpool," Tippit said at a conference on the church and random violence. "There is no way to avoid it or not be drawn in by it."

Three days after the tragedy, Tippit recalled, he was reading the "One-Year Bible" during his quiet time and the day's text was Psalm 69.

"It was not difficult to identify with Verses 1-3," the pastor of First Baptist Church of Jonesboro said. Those verses talk of being engulfed in deep waters and sinking in the miry depths, of crying for help.

"Yet it was Verse 4 that reached up and grabbed me," he said. The last part of the verse says, "I am forced to restore that which I did not steal."

"Without question, that is the position a church and its ministers find themselves in as they seek to respond to random violence," Tippit said.

As the Jonesboro tragedy unfolded, Tippit said the community and churches were "thrust into the event for which you were not responsible, but we were in a position to put back things we ourselves never took away."

After the shootings, Tippit rushed to the hospital, reacting because he had been trained for disaster response. Teachers also responded as they had been trained, using the earthquake drill as a model.

"Training, regardless of its simulation, cannot really prepare you for the actual event," Tippit said. "The event throws things at you that are unanticipated, such as the real emotions, the chaos, the confusion, the sounds and the lives.

"No amount of training prepares you for the feelings of grief, hurt and anger that arise when you see the faces of little girls who have been shot."

Since the shootings, First Baptist Church has "mainly sought to serve our members in an ongoing capacity," Tippit said.

He recounted the day suspects Andrew Golden and Mitchell Johnson stood trial. Tippit said he felt frustrated and helpless as the army of media trucks rolled up once more.

He called a representative of an organization offering ministry to those in crisis who suggested the church become a "compassion center."

"It was to be a place where the families of the victims could go during the trial," Tippit said, explaining the church is a block from the courthouse.

"We agreed we would provide lunch for the 125 members of the families, teachers and police," he said. "That was truly a gift for those families that day. They grieved, cried, laughed, hugged and were fed all they wanted in a place of refuge."

"We allowed no media nor did we permit any interviews. The response from those participating was truly gratifying," he said.

When ministers and churches confront random violence -- and he predicted that the issue is not if but when random violence will strike -- they should "remember God," Tippit said.

"God is a God who suffers with us and for us. Remember that God is in charge. Remember that you are only able to act in his strength and power. Remember that he is the one who ultimately restores what has been stolen."

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Churches, community often 'pull back' from victims of violence, speaker says

By Dan Martin

SAN ANTONIO, Texas (ABP) -- Congregations and communities often react to random violence not by reaching out to the survivors and victims, but by pulling back from them, according to a former pastor who faced such a situation.

"One of the strangest phenomena of violent death is that as the community tries to cope with the shock that such a thing could happen in their town and to find a rational explanation for the crime, they somehow feel that the victim must have done something to cause his or her death," said Dick Maples.

Maples, who was a pastor 34 years before becoming director of the church/minister-relations department of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, spoke at a conference on the church and random violence at First Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas.

"In cases of random violence, the community's response is often to distance itself from the victims at a time when they most need help," he said.

Maples told pastors they have a responsibility to interpret to the church and community the facts of a tragedy.

"We must help them understand that random violence is a criminal act for which the criminal and the criminal alone is responsible," he said. Ministers must keep congregations involved with the grieving victim-family, he said.

"This is not a time to pull back from them or to isolate them as if they have a communicable disease," he advised. "This is a time for the church to put its arms around the family and love them back to wholeness, and for the community to express its encouragement and acceptance."

Maples recounted his own experiences of ministry following an act of random violence when a 10-year-old member of his church was abducted, raped and murdered. He also was a pastor in Texas City, where more than 600 people were killed a decade earlier in a refinery explosion. Those experiences, he said, taught him that ministering to people in sudden-death situations such as traffic or construction accidents is different from ministering to victims of random criminal violence.

"There is nothing to compare with the impact and profound shock of sudden and unexpected violent death," he said.

In all of the instances, "the most important thing a minister can do is to be present physically and emotionally to the family over the long haul," he said.

Maples said he adopted the practice of going to be with families "with my arms outstretched and my mouth zipped."

"It is not what you say, it is who you are: a representative of God, a source of spiritual strength, a friend. We don't need to have all the answers -- at times like these, there are no answers -- so we dare not give these desperately wounded children of God empty cliches."

Maples encouraged churches and pastors to give victims of random violence "the gift of listening. There is tremendous power in the act of listening to our people in times of violence," he said.

In times of grief, stress and loss after acts of violence, "the greatest gift the minister and the church has to offer is hope," Maples concluded. "We hold out hope that these victimized survivors will recover from their sad grief and life will go on again.

"We hold out the hope of God's help, remembering the words of Psalm 34:18 -- 'the Lord is near the broken-hearted' -- and we hold out the hope of the resurrection. It is the promise we will one day be with our loved ones. 'Because I live, you will live also,' Jesus said."

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Wayne Oates Institute plans second on-line conference

By Mark Wingfield

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- After presenting its first-ever virtual workshop over the Internet last fall, the Wayne Oates Institute has announced a second opportunity for pastoral-care workers to participate in a conference without leaving the comfort of their workstations.

"Human Values in the New Millennium" is the focus of the institute's May 10-15 Internet conference.

Papers and dialogues related to the workshop will help ministers learn how to counsel others about issues such as personal autonomy, informed consent, futile treatment and human dignity, said Vicki Hollon, director of the institute based in Louisville, Ky.

The on-line workshop will feature presentations by Paul Simmons, a biomedical ethicist who previously taught at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, and Robert Sexton, a neurological surgeon and chairman of the ethics committee for Caritas Health System.

Participants who pay a \$99 registration fee will have 24-hour access to learning modules prepared by Simmons and Sexton and will be able to participate in real-time dialogues on-line with both presenters.

The Oates Institute's first Internet conference last November drew 200 participants who interacted with 16 presenters.

"When we started the institute, I would never have believed that this conference would have happened," said Oates, who is considered to be the father of pastoral care among Baptists. "But by the grace and inspiration of God it did, and a lot of learning and fellowship took place."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: For information about the on-line conference, go to www.oates.org.

Seminary establishes scholarship honoring church's role in founding

AIKEN, S.C. (ABP) -- An anonymous donor has given more than \$100,000 to establish a scholarship for students from South Carolina who attend Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond.

The scholarship recognizes the role of First Baptist Church of Greenville, S.C., in the seminary's founding. The church was host for the 1989 meeting at which a vote was taken to launch the independent, moderate Baptist seminary in Virginia.

Establishment of the scholarship was announced April 23 at a meeting of the South Carolina Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in Aiken.

The Greenville church was the site of a March 1989 meeting of the Alliance of Baptists (then called the Southern Baptist Alliance) where the national organization voted to begin a new seminary.

Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond opened in 1991 with 32 students. It currently has 14 full-time faculty members and has enrolled 285 students for the 1998-99 school year.

"We are grateful to be honored by a member of our church in this way, for we are proud of the fact that BTSR was born in our church," said Hardy Clemons, pastor of First Baptist Church of Greenville.

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-- By ABP staff

Chechnyan pastor beheaded; other leaders still missing

GROZNY, Chechnya (ABP) -- Russian Baptist leaders have confirmed reports that Aleksandr Kulakov, 65, a Baptist pastor in Grozny, Chechnya, has been beheaded. His head was reportedly displayed in an open market area, and police invited church members to come to a public morgue in an effort to identify his body.

Kulakov disappeared March 12 and was widely believed to have been kidnapped by radical Islamic forces in the area. He had led the struggling Baptist congregation in Grozny since its previous pastor, Alexei Sitnikov, was kidnapped in October 1998. There have been no ransom demands or reports of his whereabouts.

Volodya Kargiev, youth leader of the Central Baptist Church in Vladikavkaz (North Ossetia), has also been reported as kidnapped by Chechnyan bandits. A \$100,000 ransom has been demanded for his release, according to a report in Baptist Times on April 8. Two Orthodox priests were also kidnapped in Chechnya the first week in April, one of them taken from his church altar by four men with machine guns, according to the newspaper.

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-- European Baptist Press Service

Christians in Nazareth attacked; mosque proposed near church

NAZARETH, Israel (ABP) -- Christians in the Nazareth area of Israel face pressure following recent riots by Muslims, who attacked businesses owned by Christians and injured some individual Christians in their cars along the streets.

"We need a lot of prayer," said Phillip Saa'd of Haifa, chairman of the Association of Baptist Churches in Israel. "We are under a lot of pressure -- all Christian Arabs," he said.

Saa'd grew up near Nazareth and knows well its people and Christian situation.

Tensions have been building for more than a year due in part to a controversial proposal to build a large mosque near the Church of the Annunciation, a Christian landmark in Nazareth.

A city-owned lot near the church has been occupied by a Muslim group, which is proposing that a mosque be built on the site with a minaret taller than the church's steeple.

The city had planned to place a small park on the site, incorporating into it the tomb of a revered Muslim. Those who have occupied the land, however, are insisting the mosque, which would be one of the largest in the Middle East, be built on the lot.

Police have not intervened to stop attacks on people and property by individuals on both sides. Since national elections are planned in May, Saa'd said, many Christians believe the government is not stepping in because they do not want to alienate the Muslim voters. There is now a Muslim majority in Nazareth. "It is against government interest to take a side," he explained.

Christians in the area are also concerned, he said, because Muslim extremists continue to actively work in the surrounding towns and villages. In many of these places, Christians, Jews and Muslims have coexisted without major problems. Now extremism from both the Orthodox Jews and Muslims is increasing.

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-- European Baptist Press Service

'Restorative justice' ministry must not forget victims, mothers say

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- "Restorative justice" ministry is incomplete if it extends hope to offenders but fails to touch crime victims and their families, two mothers of murdered daughters told a recent conference in Texas.

"You owe it to yourself as ministers to find out what the other half is like. Your job is just halfway done if you don't consider the victims," said Paula Kurland of Houston, whose 21-year-old daughter Mitzi was stabbed 28 times by a stalker in 1986. "If you're only hearing one side, how can you feel the job is complete?"

Kurland and Pat Stonestreet participated in a victim-impact panel discussion at the sixth annual Statewide Restorative Justice Ministry Conference in Dallas, April 9-10. The conference was sponsored in part by the Baptist General Convention of Texas and Texas Baptist Men.

Stonestreet never had an opportunity to talk directly with Kenneth Harris, the man who repeatedly raped, stabbed, choked and drowned her 28-year-old daughter, Lisa. But on the day after Lisa's funeral, as the family gathered in Stonestreet's living room, they made a commitment.

"My husband said, 'You know, we have to forgive that man.' I didn't want to, but that night, my family made that decision. It took me three years to get there, but that early decision short-circuited a lot of bitterness, anger and hatred that could have developed," she said.

"The highest form of obedience [to God] is forgiveness," she concluded.

Kurland came to that same conclusion but by a different path. Kurland, who was brought up in a home with one Baptist and one Catholic parent, described her own spiritual pilgrimage of restoration, which eventually led to a face-to-face meeting with her daughter's killer on death row.

Driving to Houston one night from Baton Rouge, La., Kurland heard a message on Christian radio about forgiveness. She realized she would be sentenced to a life of bitterness unless she forgave the man who killed her daughter and placed him in God's hands.

"You forgive because it frees you," she said. "Hopefully, one day, it will free the offender, but that's not the reason you do it. You do it because it frees you."

Kurland became convinced that her faith demanded that she forgive the person who murdered her daughter, even though she could never forgive his actions.

"You don't have to forgive what he did. You have to forgive him," she came to realize. "It became important for me to visit him to tell him he was forgiven."

Kurland ultimately met her daughter's killer through Victim Offender Mediation/Dialogue, a program of the Victim Services Division in the Texas Department of Criminal Justice.

The program provides victims of violent crime the opportunity to have structured, face-to-face meetings with their offenders in a safe and secure environment.

The goal, said Raven Kazen, director of TDJC Victims Services, is to help victims heal and offenders to take responsibility for their behavior and face the full impact of their crime.

Some victims need to ask questions and receive answers that only the offender can provide, Kazen said. That wasn't the case for Kurland.

"I never wanted to ask him why," she said. "That was never important to me. What was important was that I have the opportunity to give him back the responsibility for the devastation and pain and destruction that he brought into a lot of people's lives."

Even though her family did not support the decision, Kurland met Jonathan Wayne Nobles, the man who killed Mitzi and her roommate.

"Meeting with him was the hardest thing I ever did, second only to burying my child," she said.

In the process of preparing for the mediation dialogue, Kurland learned that Nobles had become a Roman Catholic while in prison, and she initially resisted the idea she might have to witness to him.

"I had shared the last 12 years with him. Now I had to share my God with him? No way!" she said.

In their face-to-face meeting, however, Kurland said she recognized the depth of Nobles' remorse for his crime, and she believed his newfound faith was genuine.

But for Kurland, Nobles' repentance was a matter between him and God. Her role was to offer forgiveness unconditionally.

"I went against my whole family, but I knew that if I didn't tell Jonathan that I had forgiven him, I would be a prisoner for the rest of my life," she said. "And I couldn't live with that."

Some time later, Kurland saw Nobles again. It was on the day of his execution by lethal injection. Kurland recalled the scene as they brought the convicted killer into the death chamber, strapped to a gurney.

"Jonathan blew me a kiss and told me he loved me," she said. "He addressed each of us (the victims' families) individually. He died singing 'Silent Night.' And I know that my daughter and ... [her roommate] greeted him."

Kurland remains convinced that her own restoration could not have been achieved without the opportunity to meet personally with the man who committed the crime against her family.

That commitment led her recently to become involved in the Sycamore Tree Project, a program that facilitates mediations and leads offenders to take responsibility for their actions.

She encouraged volunteers at the restorative-justice conference to "look at the whole picture" and look for ways to reach every person involved in crime.

"You're only doing half the job if you don't find the victim. See if you can bring this all together," she urged.

"There is no victimless crime. There is always a victim."

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Churches can offer ministry to police officers, speaker says

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) --Volunteers in restorative-justice ministry can offer biblical solutions to the cynicism, anger and alienation that many law enforcement develop, said Bob Vernon, retired assistant chief of the Los Angeles Police Department.

Vernon, a 38-year veteran with the LAPD and founder of the Point Man Leadership Institute, spoke to a prayer breakfast at a recent statewide Restorative Justice Ministry Conference, sponsored in part by Texas Baptists.

He identified several pitfalls common among law-enforcement personnel:

-- Limited-perspective syndrome. "You only see a small, skewed sample of humanity. People don't call us to report good events. Can you imagine what that does to you when you only see people at their worst on a continual basis? You become very cynical."

-- Exposure to the extremes of life, such as trauma, injury or death. Police officers "learn to turn off the switch," Vernon said. As a result, "You become a callused person," he said.

-- Dealing with authority and developing command presence. Officers need to develop "command presence in crisis situations," Vernon said, but they can become "badge heavy" if it spills over into other areas.

"You get so used to using that authority, that you begin to use it around your family and friends. That won't wash well."

-- Destruction of one's work. "In police work, you can put your life on the line, nearly die, and see this person released on a technicality," Vernon said. That frustration can lead to anger, not only at the criminal-justice system, but also at God.

"Police officers need to understand that the war is over. They don't have to be angry anymore. Jesus died to reconcile them," Vernon said.

-- Association with criminals. Police officers can "become more akin to them than to the rest of society, than to straight people," Vernon said.

-- The Knights-of-the-Round-Table syndrome. Police officers come to see themselves as "the thin blue line that separates order from anarchy," Vernon said. That leads to withdrawal, in-grouping and alienation. "Jesus came to adopt us into his family," Vernon said. "That's the exact opposite of alienation."

He offered three suggestions for churches and volunteers in restorative-justice ministry:

-- Try to understand officers. Walk in their shoes. Accompany a correctional officer on the job. Ride along in the squad car with a police officer.

-- Encourage officers to be exposed to people in a positive way. If they are Christians, involve them in teaching Sunday school. If they are not, urge them to coach Little League.

-- Gradually integrate police officers into the family of faith. Hold an appreciation banquet in a neutral setting where other law-enforcement personnel are invited. Have a retreat where only police officers attend. When they become Christians, they need one-on-one discipleship by someone who understands -- a criminal-justice chaplain or another police officer. Link them to other Christian police officers.

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