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**Teen birth rates
decline in 1990s**

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Teen birth rates declined 16 percent from 1991 to 1997 in the United States, according to figures released April 29 by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Service.

The percentage of girls aged 15-19 giving birth fell 4 percent in 1997, the sixth year in a row that teen births have declined and the lowest rate since 1973.

Another study by the private Alan Guttmacher Institute reported that teenage pregnancy dropped 4 percent between 1995 and 1996. The abortion rate for teenagers also fell 3 percent in that short time.

Researchers cited several factors that may have contributed to the drop, including abstinence programs, increased use of contraception and fear of AIDS. Other possible contributing factors included the economy, and some suggested that peer pressure to avoid sex might be having a positive effect on teen pregnancy.

"Communities and parents all across America have joined with us to help our young people understand that they should delay parenthood until they are truly ready to nurture and support a child of their own," said HHS Secretary Donna Shalala.

The HHS study also found continued declines in out-of-wedlock births, record high levels of prenatal care and the lowest rate ever of smoking by pregnant women. The overall national birth rate reached a record low in 1997, according the study, of 14.5 births per 1,000 population, or 3.8 million total births.

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-- By ABP staff

Student-preaching program draws fire after racism charge

By Jennifer Davis Rash

BIRMINGHAM, Ala. (ABP) -- Charges of racial discrimination have prompted Samford University officials to revamp a 50-year-old program by which students are invited as guest preachers in Alabama churches.

Samford President Thomas Corts announced April 12 that spring-semester activities for the university's "H-Day" have been canceled and that the program is being restructured for the fall.

The move came after students from Africa claimed they were not allowed to preach in a few churches in the state because they are black. The incidents reportedly upset both black and white students at the Baptist-affiliated university in Birmingham, Ala. But administrators vowed to make sure it does not happen again.

"We have a responsibility as an educational institution," Corts said, referring to the university's stated commitment to be racially inclusive.

Dennis Aggrey, a third-year divinity student at Samford's Beeson Divinity School, said he faced racial discrimination within the program the past two years. "I signed up to go, and they told me I could not go," said Aggrey, a native of Nigeria.

"It is painful," he said. "It is like looking down on someone for something they don't have control over. Nobody has control of what they look like or where they are born. To be pushed aside because of that is painful."

Daniel Chelagat, a Beeson student from Kenya, said he was surprised to learn he could not go to a church because the congregation did not approve of a black preacher. "In Kenya, there is no such thing as color," he said. "I was encouraged to sign up, but then twice I was told I could not go."

H-Day -- which gets its name from Samford's original name, Howard College -- is a student-led program. Ministerial students sign up during the fall and spring semesters to participate. Churches volunteer to be hosts for the students through their local association.

Sundays during the fall and spring semesters are dedicated to specific associations. Participating students preach and lead music in the churches that invite them. A student director and student committee attempt to match the students with the setting and worship style of the host church.

Along with the experience of leading local congregations, the students also receive an honorarium from the church, as well as possibilities of future ministry opportunities.

Corts said the majority of experiences by the students have been positive and encouraging.

"The churches of Alabama have been enormously helpful in exposing the students to church pulpits," Corts noted. "And generally they have been enormously accepting of all races and ethnic groups."

Some of the African students have received much-larger-than-average honoraria from white churches, along with invitations to return for other church activities, officials said.

Even the African students who are raising concerns about racial discrimination want to see the program continue, because it is such a "rich experience," Corts said. "They want to be involved, and they want all students to be involved."

He said the students continued to participate in the program even after their encounter with discrimination.

Aaron Matti, a Beeson student from Africa, said he feels strongly about continuing relationships with the churches that have offended him and the other two students. He said showing those churches Christian love is the way to help them overcome their prejudice.

The revamped program, which could don a new name, will gain university sponsorship and will no longer be an independent, student-operated activity.

"There needs to be a clear understanding that if this is a university activity, then it has to be just that," Corts said. He also pointed out that undergraduates and graduates need two separate programs because they have different goals.

Timothy George, dean of the Beeson school, agreed, noting that students in the divinity school started participating in the program only three or four years ago following an invitation by undergraduate H-Day participants.

Both graduates and undergraduates benefit from a program like H-Day, George said, but in different ways.

"It has had a wonderful ministry for many years," George said. "It has been good for the students by giving them good, practical experience in ministry. And it has been good for the churches to hear a fresh proclamation of the gospel."

Still, the program has been the source of some confusion over the years, Corts said, noting its unofficial tie to the university, how policy decisions are made and criteria for participation, as well as the recent racial problem.

"I think the whole situation leads us to see that the way H-Day has operated has been a little bit out there on its own," Corts said. "It is not a good arrangement for anybody."

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Gospel themes prominent in popular 'Mitford' novels

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- If Baptist readers of the "Mitford" novels identify with Father Tim, an Episcopal priest and the series' central character, it may be because author Jan Karon has an affinity for Baptists.

A devout Episcopalian, Karon says she has a deep appreciation for Baptists' commitment to the Bible and faith-filled living.

After all, those are core attributes of characters in her five best-selling novels: "At Home in Mitford," "A Light in the Window," "These High, Green Hills," "Out to Canaan" and "A New Song."

Father Tim frequently quotes Scripture, both in the pulpit and out. (His dog, Barnabas, stops dead in his tracks when his master recites the Good Book.) And by words and deeds in the fictional village of Mitford, Father Tim frequently points people to Christ as their hope for redemption.

"If I have a theme in these books, it is one of redemption," Karon said.

Some might see this as a handicap in a publishing world dominated by murder mysteries, seamy romances and tell-all biographies. Yet Karon has turned it into an advantage.

The faith-driven content of the Mitford series "has been received with thunderous applause," she said in a recent interview in Dallas during a stop in a tour promoting her newest book.

"People were starving to death to have that part of their being represented in fiction," she said.

While the first four Mitford books together sold 3.5 million copies and spent weeks on the New York Times bestsellers list, the fifth volume, released April 15, may be on track to break that record. In its first eight days, "A New Song" sold a half-million copies.

That's an amazing success for any novel but particularly for a series built around Christian values and characters.

The Mitford books are not considered "Christian fiction," a category that has been gaining in popularity with the growth of Christian bookstores. Yet devout readers readily identify with the characters in the novels who deal openly with questions of faith and commitment, service and duty, love and friendship.

Early readers of "A New Song" were giving it rave reviews on Amazon.com, the on-line bookseller.

"As the wife of a pastor myself for over 35 years, I have thoroughly enjoyed the Mitford books," wrote a woman from Chelmsford, Mass. "The characters and situations are very realistic, and I find myself identifying with so many of the situations that happen to Father Tim and Cynthia." (Cynthia is introduced in an early novel as Father Tim's neighbor. She later becomes a love interest and they marry.)

Another reader from Greenbrier, Tenn., described the latest Mitford volume as "incredible" and called Karon "a gifted author who can be sweet without being sappy and inspirational without being preachy."

That's a description Karon probably would cherish, because at age 6, she wanted to be a preacher and at 10 she wanted to be a writer. "Now I'm a writer writing about a preacher," she explained, drawing her childhood goals full circle.

Karon approaches her writing with the zeal of an evangelist. In "A New Song" she in effect turns preacher, penning words to a sermon by Father Tim. The topic of that sermon: the importance of a personal relationship with Jesus Christ.

During her stop in Texas, Karon read that sermon as part of her speech to the Dallas Women's Club. She received a standing ovation.

"I want to talk about the Lord to as many people as possible," she said after the speech. "That's why I try to go to the big crowds."

She said her Christian faith is an integral part of her personal mission as an author. "I cannot and will not write without lifting up the Savior." If she were unable to express her spirituality in her writing, she asked, "Why bother?"

Of course, it's easier when your protagonist is a minister.

But a minister is also the perfect character through which to view life in a small town, Karon said. "He gets to see everything ... and we get to see everything, get to know everything."

Karon credits God for giving her the inspiration for the character. "I did not choose Father Tim; Father Tim sort of chose me. God moved me in that direction."

Father Tim emerged from a twist in the plot line of Karon's own life. A successful advertising executive in San Francisco and New York City, she did not accept Christ until she was 42 years old.

"I came to the end of myself," she recalled matter-of-factly. "That's when God could really work."

She quoted the 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal, who wrote that there is a "God-shaped vacuum" in the heart of every person. "I knew there was an emptiness in me, a giant vacuum. But I didn't know how to fill it."

"Jesus didn't mean much to me," she said, explaining that she learned as a child to view Christianity as a religion of wrath and vengeance.

She suspects others have the same feelings. If they'll read the Mitford series, they'll be told how to fill the void in their lives in explicit detail. And they'll see a kinder, gentler side of the Christian life exemplified in Father Tim and his small-town flock.

"Father Tim's ministry is a ministry of grace, a very New Testament ministry," she said. "He allows people to be themselves. He never pushes himself or Jesus Christ on anybody. ... He is a man who simply loves his people into the kingdom of God."

In each book, Karon works in the plan of salvation and what Baptists call the "sinner's prayer," a commitment of one's life to God through faith in Jesus.

For readers who already are believers, the Mitford books provide a healthy dose of encouragement, Karon said. "People who know Jesus want to hear other people talk about it."

She believes that's one reason her books have developed such a loyal following among people ages 10 to 90, both male and female. "There is no demographic" to the readership, she said, other than "they're the nicest people in the world."

Another reason is that the stories are entertaining and intriguing without using profanity or glorifying immoral behavior, Karon said.

"We're being scared to death every time we turn on the TV. ... Everything is so frightening all the time. Where is any decency?"

While it may appear to many that violence and mayhem describe "reality" today, "I'm also writing about something that's real," she said, "decent people living normal lives."

That makes her style of writing hard to classify. It's not mystery. It's not suspense. It's not romance. But it includes elements of all three.

"Mitford is its own genre," she suggested. "It loosely fits into the English category of the village novel." Garrison Keillor's popular "Lake Wobegon" books would fall into the same category, she added.

With the fifth Mitford book completed, Karon said she plans to write two more Mitford novels, a novella and a cookbook. She won't say what lies ahead for Father Tim and Cynthia, although they will have a happy ending. "I promise you a happy ending," she said. "I love happy endings."

In the meantime, there's a good chance Father Tim and Cynthia and the folks of Mitford will become movie stars as well. Karon said she's confident a Mitford movie will be made. She said she has received several proposals for such a movie but hasn't yet found the right terms and conditions.

When a movie is made, she said, it will be done under terms requiring that the spirit and spiritual focus of the books be retained.

Many readers want to know if she intends to spin off a separate book on the adult life of Dooley Barlowe, a troubled young boy befriended by Father Tim in the first Mitford book who becomes a recurring character in later books.

Such a book won't be written, she said, because some story lines are best left to the imagination.

What shouldn't be left to anyone's imagination, she said, is the story of redemption found in the relationship between Father Tim and Dooley, which is not unlike the story of redemption found between God and the creation in the Bible.

"I do recommend to believers that they start talking about their faith," Karon said. "And they must be bold. We need to share our faith in this hurting world. There is no excuse for hiding the love of Jesus Christ from other people."

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-- EDITOR'S NOTE: A photo of author Jan Karon is available on request from the Baptist Standard.

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