



Associated Baptist Press

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May 4, 1999

(99-35)

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Historic South Carolina church votes to end Southern Baptist ties

By Todd Deaton

GREENVILLE, S.C. (ABP) -- First Baptist Church in Greenville, S.C., voted May 2 to sever ties with the Southern Baptist Convention, a denomination it helped found in 1845.

The 168-year-old congregation voted 500-47 to accept a committee recommendation to "voluntarily and deliberately discontinue our affiliation" with the SBC. The congregation follows about a dozen moderate churches that have severed ties with the nation's largest non-Catholic faith group during the last year over differences with the convention's recent conservative stands.

The recommendation came after an ad hoc committee formed last summer studied events in both the convention and the church during the past two decades. Two town hall meetings were held for input from other members.

In the preface to the adopted resolution, the committee observed that "a large majority of church members who expressed opinions are dissatisfied with our association with the Southern Baptist Convention and are ready to make a substantive change in the relationship."

The committee said its task was not to "criticize or to judge" the SBC but to "identify who we are as a Baptist congregation so that we may remain true to our church's mission statement."

The resolution does not list specific grievances but claims that SBC leadership for the last 20 years "has steadily guided that convention to embrace theological and ecclesiastical tenets which are vastly different from those which represent the heritage of First Baptist Church, Greenville."

Church members were quoted in news reports as saying last summer's declaration by the SBC that wives should "submit graciously" to their husbands was a factor in the decision, but it was not the only one.

Pastor Hardy Clemons told the Greenville News the action was in response to the SBC's two-decade move in "a decidedly creedal direction and in a decidedly politically controlled direction."

"We believe the church is about spirituality and worship and ministry, not about political control," he said.

The vote does not alter the church's affiliation with its state convention or association. The resolution states that the church "looks forwards to continued association with the South Carolina Baptist Convention, the Greenville Baptist Association and the congregations that relate to those organizations."

According to the state convention's accounting department, the church gave \$35,983 to state-mission causes in 1998. The 2,500-member church ended financial support of the SBC in 1993. The congregation affiliated with the moderate splinter group the Alliance of Baptists in 1986 and with the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship in 1991. Clemons is a past CBF moderator, the organization's top elected leader.

First Baptist Church of Greenville was organized in 1831. Its founder, William Bullein Johnson, whom some have called the "father of the Southern Baptist Convention," is considered a principal architect of the organization and was elected its first president at the inaugural meeting in Augusta, Ga., in 1845.

The Greenville church also provided the first home for Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, which formed in Greenville in 1859 and moved to Louisville, Ky., in 1877.

In 1988, the church was host to a meeting of the Alliance of Baptists at which a vote was taken to establish Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond. The Virginia school was the earliest in a crop of new Baptist seminaries and divinity schools formed in the last decade as alternatives to the SBC's six seminaries, now controlled by conservatives.

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

Tornadoes kill 45 in Oklahoma, Kansas

By Bob Allen

OKLAHOMA CITY (ABP) -- Some of the strongest tornadoes ever recorded tore across the Oklahoma and Kansas plains May 3, killing at least 45 people and injuring hundreds.

President Clinton acted swiftly to declare 11 counties in Oklahoma and one county in Kansas disaster areas, clearing the way for federal aid.

Officials said May 4 that at least 40 Oklahomans died in a series of tornadoes which formed about 45 miles southwest of Oklahoma City and then swept north and east over a five-hour period. The storm spawned an estimated 45 tornadoes in Oklahoma, the larger ones leaving paths more than a half-mile wide, according to news reports. Another five deaths were reported in Kansas, where an estimated 17 tornadoes occurred.

The deadliest tornadoes hit in Oklahoma's central region. Eleven people died in Bridge Creek, about 30 miles southwest of Oklahoma City. Other fatalities were reported in Oklahoma City and three nearby communities: Midwest City, Moore and Norman., according to the Associated Press.

The storm left thousands homeless. Officials said an estimated 1,500 homes and other structures were destroyed, and property damage could reach a record high.

"It looks like the Murrah Building, but instead of nine stories tall, it's spread out over a large area," said Jon Hansen, Oklahoma City assistant fire chief.

The storm destroyed a grade school and heavily damaged a high school in Moore, prompting the school's superintendent to wonder how the 1998-99 school year could be finished, according to a newspaper report.

Officials said some of the twisters were rated category F4 or possibly F5, describing a storm with winds approaching 300 miles an hour.

The storm was Oklahoma's deadliest since 1947, when a twister killed 113 in Woodward. The deadliest storm in history was a series of tornadoes that killed 689 people in Missouri, Illinois and Indiana in 1925, before modern tornado-warning systems were developed.

The storm system moved east May 4, creating a risk of tornadoes in parts of eastern Oklahoma, Arkansas, northern Louisiana and northeast Texas.

Ten Red Cross centers had opened by May 4 to serve 1,500 people, CNN reported.

A leader in Oklahoma Baptists' disaster-relief network said volunteers were on standby as officials continued to assess damage and complete rescue operations. "We have to wait for FEMA and Red Cross to say, 'Yes, we need you,'" Charles Gambrell, disaster-relief coordinator for the state's northwest section, said May 4.

"I'm sure our units are going to be needed," said Gambrell, who lives in Hydro, a small town 60 miles west of Oklahoma City. He predicted it would be "a day or two" before the disaster response would be mobilized, and said Baptist disaster-relief units from other states will likely be requested as well.

Oklahoma's disaster-relief team, which organized in 1973, has equipment including a 45-foot trailer and tractor that serves as a field kitchen to provide meals for victims and response personnel and an 18-foot trailer equipped for emergency child care.

A staff member of Capital Baptist Association in Oklahoma City said at least one affiliated church was destroyed by the storm -- Sooner Baptist Church -- and that the association's administrator, Jack Bettis, lost his home. Neither Bettis nor the association's director of missions, Ernie Perkins, could be reached for comment May 4.

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-- Information for this story was compiled from reports by the Daily Oklahoman, Associated Press and broadcast news.

Poetry provides outlet for grieving mother

By Mark Wyatt

FRESNO, Calif. (ABP) -- When Penny Young talks at a national bereavement conference later this month about writing as grief therapy, she will speak from years of experience.

It began in earnest after her only child, 19-year-old Matthew, died in a traffic accident in 1994. She wrote a poem after the accident, which was read at Matthew's funeral and became the seed for a self-published book that has prompted messages of appreciation from grateful readers.

A public-school teacher and the wife of a Southern Baptist pastor, Young did not start out intending to write a book or lead workshops. She was just looking for a way to express her grief. Several people who heard the poem at the funeral encouraged her to keep writing. Each month, on the anniversary of her son's death, she would write another poem. She also kept a journal.

"I would get in bed at night after a good day and start writing, and I couldn't believe the kinds of things that came out," Young recalled. "I could be as honest as I needed to be. I think that's one of the things that saved my sanity."

In addition to her writing, Young and her husband, Ray, pastor of Harvard Terrace Baptist Church in Fresno, Calif., began seeing a Christian counselor. After several months, the counselor suggested that Penny spend some time daily writing specifically about joy.

"The only thing I could think of was writing about Matthew," she declared. Soon, Young was finding inspiration for writing about joy at unexpected times.

"I found I would have these incredible thoughts while driving (or) in the middle of the night. I was always writing things down," she said. Later she would return to those notes, spending up to 30 hours rewriting a single poem.

In time, some of her poems appeared in newsletters of grief-support organizations. She also developed an annotated "grief bibliography" that she sent as a resource to people in grief.

"I wrote it as therapy, but I also saw a need," Young said. "What I was looking for early in grief was something to tell me how long is this pain going to endure. There was nothing out there."

Young said she eventually came to realize that grief is different for everyone. "Nobody can tell you how long it is going to be," she said. "I needed something to tell me that six months down the line you're going to have a good day, even if the next one isn't good." So she started dating each new poem and asked several friends to read and respond to them.

"Without exception they said, 'It shows hope, it shows the ups and downs of grief.' That was exactly what I was hoping for," she said.

Such encouragement convinced the Youngs to publish her poems in a book. "I'll See You in the Sunrise: A Mother's Odyssey in Grief" came out in September 1998, four years after their son's death. The book features illustrations by a church member who knew Matthew as well as the annotated bibliography of grief resources.

"I think probably the most frequent comment from people who have read it who have lost a child has been, 'You have been there, you know what it is like, I felt exactly this way. I identified exactly with what you wrote,'" Penny Young said.

Students in her 8th-grade English classes eagerly read copies of the book purchased by their school librarian. Some told Young it helped them deal with grief issues involving divorce and the loss of parents or siblings.

"What it did for them was validate their feelings," Young said. "The book gave some of them the courage to say, 'I hurt too, I still grieve over dad or grandma.' It gave them the opportunity to express grief and do things that would not be looked upon as silly, to remember a loved one in a special way."

"I'll See You in the Sunrise" covers two years of grief. On the second anniversary of Matthew's death, Penny read poems from the book at the dedication service for a memorial wall in the Youngs' home.

Young said she is considering writing another book. She thinks it probably would be less difficult than the first, "because it would not be dealing with the heavy emotional issues (and because) I am further along in the grief journey," she said. But although the process and the content might differ from her initial effort, the message she would want to convey remains the same.

"There is hope, there is joy," she said. "God is there even when it seems like he is far, far away."

EDITOR'S NOTE: "I'll See You in the Sunrise" is available from InSpirit Publishing, 921 Bliss Avenue, Clovis, CA 93611-7416. The cost is \$12 plus \$2 shipping and handling. Proceeds are used to fund scholarships and ministry grants in memory of Matthew Young.

Child's death opens door to ministry for pastor, wife

By Mark Wyatt

FRESNO, Calif. (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist minister and wife from California are scheduled to take leading roles in a national conference for parents who have lost their children to death.

Ray and Penny Young from Clovis, Calif., will present workshops, join in panel discussions and lead worship at the fourth National Bereavement Conference sponsored by 'In Loving Memory,' a support group for parents with no surviving children, May 27-30 in Vienna, Va.

He is pastor of Harvard Terrace Baptist Church in Fresno, Calif. She is a public-school teacher and his partner in ministry. But their interest in the conference is more than ministerial -- it's personal.

The Youngs' only child, Matthew, died in a car crash Sept. 14, 1994, as he was driving home from the University of Southern California. A sophomore at USC, Matthew was studying exercise science in preparation for a career in physical therapy. He was 19.

Matthew's death shattered his parents' world.

"When you lose your children you lose your dreams, your hope, your future," Penny Young said in an interview. "You lose everything all at once and most people don't understand that."

As a pastor, Ray Young was experienced in ministering to bereaved people. But dealing with his own loss was a different matter.

"I don't express my grief very well," he confessed. "I am very private about that kind of thing." Despite that, he said he felt "a real freedom to teach my church family what we needed" after Matthew's death.

"I didn't hesitate," he recalled. "I think that comes from having a real honest, open relationship where they understand that I don't have all the answers. I'm a fellow pilgrim, a work in progress."

More than four years since Matthew's death, Ray and Penny Young still get encouragement from church members, although Ray recalled one occasion when a church member publicly expressed frustration with their grief.

"I was in a prayer meeting once where a lady prayed for me aloud and told God she was really tired of hearing about my loss," he said. "But I wasn't offended by it. It was done in the kind of spirit in which she just said to the Lord, 'They're not the only ones who are hurting.' It was a good thing for me. I think they tired of it. They were ready for us to be further along than we were at times."

"What they don't understand is, we will never be over it," Penny added quickly, suggesting another reason some church members grew impatient.

"Even though they grieved the loss of our son their lives didn't change," she said. "They went on, adapted and adjusted to it, and they have similar expectations for us. They did not understand our lives will never be the same."

Soon after Matthew's death, the Youngs heard about "Alive Alone," a support group that publishes a newsletter for bereaved parents. They also heard about a conference for "childless parents" sponsored by an organization called "In Loving Memory." Linda and Glen Nielsen of Reston, Va., founded the organization after their only child, Lisa, died of brain cancer at age 22 in 1988.

At first, the Youngs weren't ready to take that step. In 1997, however, they attended a conference sponsored by In Loving Memory in Indianapolis. They knew what they needed but were not sure what to expect.

"I think we were looking for support -- the freedom to express grief (as) now-childless parents ... to others who know what it is like," Ray explained. "We were going for the opportunity to talk with other people in similar situations, for the opportunity to see how we could begin to minister to other people."

Penny said the "acceptance and safety" she experienced surprised her, especially since it was not a Christian conference.

"It was the safest environment I had ever been in," she said. "It didn't matter what I said or how my son died. We were bonding together related to common grief."

Ray said his ministry benefited from how the conference dealt with the "myth that this kind of a loss will destroy" the surviving parents' marriage.

"In fact people [whose children die] are not any more likely or less likely to lose their marriage than the rest," he said.

The conference also helped him realize that "how we grieve is okay -- there aren't rights and wrongs of grief ... everybody experiences it differently."

"If it helps you, it is the thing to do," he said. Learning that was "liberating" for Young, who said he also became convinced that bereaved people "bear the responsibility for teaching others" how to relate to them.

"If we want people to treat us in a particular way, we have to tell them how," he said. "I am clearly much better at grief ministry having been through it myself."

Experiencing grief over their son's death, doing research and drawing on resources from support groups have helped the Youngs gain new understanding about how grief works.

"We now understand that tears are an emotional pressure-release valve," he said "We're better off after we cry, but I don't know that I understood that before we lost Matthew. "Just dealing with people with that issue alone, I think I am much more sensitive to their tears and to what their tears are accomplishing for them emotionally."

In addition to understanding grief as a means of dealing with the pain of loss, Penny said it also is important not to overlook the therapeutic value of helping others

"I have found that one of the best ways to get release from the depression that grief gives me is in ministering and outreach to other people," she said. "If I go to someone that I know is grieving and try to help them, then my focus shifts from my own problems to them." Besides setting aside her own pain, Penny said she discovered a bonus in "the feeling that you get from helping" others who are hurting.

These days Penny conducts her ministry to bereaved persons with the aid of a "grief calendar" she developed. It reminds her to "send a card on birthdays and death anniversaries."

Sometimes the Youngs give rose bushes to people who have lost loved ones. "It is a ministry for us to remember Matthew but also to say to those people, 'We remember your loss.' That's the thing that gets me through Matthew's birthday -- knowing that I am going to go out and minister to other people," Penny said.

Ray said dealing with his feelings of loss has made him sensitive to the special needs caregivers have when they experience personal grief.

"They are accustomed to giving and not receiving, and they don't know how to handle it very well," he said. "Because they are seen as givers, others are a little ill at ease as to how to deal with them." He noted that chaplains, hospice workers, medical personnel, pastors, counselors and psychologists are all as susceptible to grief as anyone they minister to in times of bereavement.

Ray said he plans to share tips on ministering to caregivers during one of his conference workshops in Virginia. One suggestion he offers concerns the importance of staying in contact with the grieving person.

"Many little or short ministries are better than one big one," he explained. The key thing is to "be there for the long haul," he stressed. "Let them know that you are only doing what they have been doing for you." And don't worry about doing the wrong thing, he added. Ministers and other caregivers often "are more forgiving" than most, he said.

He also hopes that a worship service he will lead at the conference will help the grieving parents experience God's healing love.

"My primary focus will be to get them connected back with God if their grief has caused that kind of broken relationship, and if it hasn't, to get them to experience worshiping as a part of their grief," he said.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The National Bereavement Conference is scheduled May 27-30 at The Sheraton Premiere Hotel in Vienna, Va. For registration and information, contact Linda and Glen Nielsen at 703-435-0608.

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