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**Baptists offer assistance
to Texas storm victims**

By Ken Camp

DEKALB, Texas (ABP) -- Life may never again return to "normal" in a small Texas town hit by a tornado, a Baptist ministry official said at a community gathering May 13.

"DeKalb will never be just like it was before," said Milfred Minatrea, church ministries director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas. "As a community, you are rewriting the story of what 'normal' is. Things are not the way they were before, but you are moving toward a new normal."

The May 4 storm took the roof off an elementary school, severely damaged the high school next door, and decimated downtown businesses in the northeast Texas town.

One week after the storm, Minatrea worked with a group to counsel school children. Many had survived the storm by huddling together in the school hallway, and it was their first time to return to school since the tornado.

Using group-crisis intervention techniques, the Baptist leader and others conducted counseling with small groups of students.

Through gently probing questions about their memories of the disaster, reactions since that time and predictions about their future, the facilitators helped the children put into words emotions they had carried around for days.

"Every child in the community is rewriting his family story, weaving in what happened when the tornado hit," Minatrea said.

The counselors assured children their fears following the trauma were normal.

Minatrea asked one group of fourth graders if any of them had wanted to sleep in their parents' bed since the tornado. Before he could say, "You don't have to answer that out loud," one boy raised his hand and spoke up. The youngster said he had been scared to go to bed alone for the past week. Rather than ridicule him, many of his classmates added they had the same feelings.

The experience with the school children was so beneficial, town leaders asked Minatrea to lead a similar event for adults.

"Many had been so busy being caregivers for others that they hadn't dealt with their own losses and realized that they were victims, too," Minatrea said.

The American Red Cross helped to organize and publicize the town-hall meeting for Thursday evening, May 13, at the town's middle school.

The meeting was scheduled the night before a session sponsored by the Federal Emergency Management Agency regarding grants, loans and other governmental assistance for rebuilding.

"Before talking about board and nails, we wanted to talk about soul and spirit," Minatrea said. "This meeting was a time when people of faith came together to say, 'As bad as the disaster may have been, God was so good.'"

The marquee on one local business put it this way: "Seventy-five percent of our town destroyed. One hundred percent of our people safe."

David Warren, director of missions for Bowie Baptist Association, recruited ministers to lead counseling sessions. Minatrea trained them in the basics of group crisis intervention. He said victims of trauma need "safety and security, ventilation and validation," and they need an opportunity to "predict and prepare."

The format at the town meeting was simple. Minatrea welcomed the townspeople; a local pastor read a Scripture passage and another led in prayer.

Minatrea saluted local residents for how they had cared for each other and their children in the previous week. He told them the "honeymoon" phase of community harmony couldn't last forever, however, and warned that a certain amount of disenchantment and frustration would be the natural next step.

After an American Red Cross representative described physical and emotional effects of trauma, Minatrea said it is important for those who had survived the disaster to tell their story to others and pray together.

Following a duet rendition of "You Are My Hiding Place," the assembly broke into three groups -- parents of children who had been in one of the affected schools, residents whose homes were destroyed or seriously damaged, and those who were part of the community but not directly victimized.

Ministers recruited as group facilitators came from the area but not from inside the town. That was so they would be familiar with the local scene but detached enough not to function as victims, Minatrea explained.

But as it turned out, one of the healers had his own wounds. Paul Burkhalter, pastor of the rural Spring Hill Baptist Church, was a counselor and facilitator for one of the support groups at the town-hall meeting. The leaders who enlisted Burkhalter's help didn't realize his 8-year-old son, Joel, had been in the elementary school that the tornado hit.

Burkhalter was in neighboring New Boston when the storm swept through DeKalb. He rushed into town, only to be stopped at the outskirts by state troopers and rerouted.

Along the way, he learned the tornado had torn the roof off much of the elementary school and severely damaged the high school next door. He also heard that the middle school, where his oldest son, Caleb, was a student, was unharmed.

After three hours, he finally located his sons at the middle school, which was being turned into a victim assistance center. "It was from 3:30 to 6:30 before I finally saw Joel and Caleb face-to-face," Burkhalter said.

Some of Joel's memories of the event are vivid and easy for him to share. "He talks about walking through the knee-deep water and debris as a teacher led them out of the school," Burkhalter said.

Other memories come primarily at night. "He still wakes up saying he can hear the roar. He says the train keeps getting louder and louder," Burkhalter said.

Ronald Carroll, pastor of Temple Baptist Church in New Boston, led a support group for those in the community who neither had children at the hard-hit schools nor lost a home to the tornado.

Even so, the storm left its impact on them, he noted. One woman described the guilt she felt because her neighbors lost their homes and she escaped any serious damage. A man felt guilty because he inadvertently put a family member at risk by sending him on an errand rather than going himself.

Bill Townsley, pastor of First Baptist Church in DeKalb, joined in Carroll's group as a participant. "It gave our people a chance to air things out," he said.

Several members of First Baptist Church were in the group, Townsley said. He believed that they all benefited from hearing one another's stories -- including their pastor's as he shared his impressions.

"It helps us realize that we're all in this together," he said.

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International Baptist seminary prays for peace in Yugoslavia

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (ABP) -- The International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic, held a prayer vigil for peace in Yugoslavia May 13. The service focused specifically on children displaced in the conflict.

"We have representatives of all sides of the conflict in our IBTS community," said Keith Jones, rector of the school owned by the European Baptist Federation. Some members of the seminary community have lost touch with family because of conflict in the Balkans, while alumni serve as pastors and community workers in trouble areas, he said.

The seminary is also seeking to help those displaced by conflict by donating to Baptist World Aid and pledging financial support for one refugee family to live on the campus. The family has already fled from Serbia to Hungary but now needs a longer-term place to stay, Jones said.

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-- By ABP staff

Awards for women ministers given to two Emory students

KANSAS CITY, Kan. (ABP) -- Two women studying for the ministry at Emory University's Candler School of Theology have been named 1999 winners of the Addie Davis Awards. The awards for preaching and leadership by Baptist women are presented annually by Baptist Women in Ministry, which is based in Kansas City, Kan.

Veronice Miles, a third-year student working toward a master-of-divinity degree, won this year's preaching award. Ginny Dempsey, who is also working toward a master's degree with an emphasis in pastoral care and counseling, received the award for outstanding female leadership.

A native of Gainesville, Fla., Miles was recently ordained by Greater Bethany Baptist Church in Atlanta. Her studies include special emphasis in Christian education and black-church studies.

Dempsey has since June 1998 been preacher at Maxeys Baptist Church, a small rural congregation in Georgia. She also is a pastoral intern at First Baptist Church of Athens, Ga.

The Addie Davis Awards are named in honor of the first woman ordained in a Southern Baptist church, in 1964. The \$1,000 awards are supported by the offering taken at Baptist Women in Ministry's annual meeting and other contributions.

Nominees for the awards are sought from all seminaries, divinity schools and Baptist houses of study which partner with Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

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-- By ABP staff

House subcommittee considers religious liberty protection bill

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Witnesses at a congressional hearing May 12 disagreed about how a bill designed to bolster religious freedom would affect civil rights and whether the law is constitutional.

The Religious Liberty Protection Act would limit the power of state and local governments to interfere with religious practices. Government would be required to have a "compelling" reason before burdening any religion and to use the least-restrictive means of achieving that aim.

Religious groups say the law is needed because Supreme Court rulings have eroded the free exercise of religion guaranteed by the First Amendment.

The Supreme Court discarded the "compelling state interest" test for church-state disputes in 1990. That prompted Congress to pass the Religious Freedom Restoration Act in 1993, restoring the standard. The high court struck down part of the law, however, saying Congress exceeded its authority by imposing the law on all 50 states.

The new law, introduced May 5 by Charles Canady, R-Fla., is similar to RFRA but would be enforced largely through Congress' powers regulating spending and commerce. It also has a separate provision protecting houses of worship from zoning laws.

Canady, chairman of the House Constitution Subcommittee, said the measure would apply the "most rigorous legal test" to state and local regulations that end up burdening religious practice.

Since 1990, religious groups have complained that generally applied laws, such as zoning ordinances, have burdened their religious practices. Supporters of the new law argue that under current Supreme Court precedents, alcoholic-beverage laws could be used to prevent churches from serving wine to minors during communion.

But RLPA is meeting strong resistance from groups on the far left and far right.

Canady said he is puzzled by people who supported the 1993 law but now find some flaws in this bill, "which simply reflects the same policy objectives that we were pursuing in the Religious Freedom Restoration Act."

Opponents criticize the bill's use of the commerce powers of Congress and the possibility it could be used to trump other civil-rights laws.

Critics of the commerce provisions include the Home School Legal Defense Association. In a written statement, Michael Farris, head of the group, said the bill's commerce provisions would grant Congress too much power over religion. "If Congress has Commerce Clause power to order state governments to not discriminate against churches under RLPA, then Congress also has Commerce Clause power to order churches not to discriminate against homosexuals," Farris said.

Farris also argued that protecting religion through the commerce provisions would show preference to big churches over small churches.

Rep. Melvin Watt, D-N.C., ranking minority member of the subcommittee, agreed with Farris. "I have some concerns that we're setting up a situation where two different religious groups doing exactly the same thing -- one of them being covered by this bill, the other is not covered by this bill -- and the sole determinant is whether you can establish some nexus with commerce."

But RLPA supporters said that while the bill may not protect every person and every religious practice, it would cover the large majority.

Douglas Laycock, associate dean for research at the University of Texas Law School, said even small churches affect interstate commerce. "If a little church buys \$100 worth of books and a big church buys \$10,000 worth of books in interstate commerce, they both affect interstate commerce and they're protected by this bill," he said.

Richard Land, head of the Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said opponents' concerns about "anti-federalism" are "misguided in this instance." The bill's purpose is not to "empower the federal government," Land said, but to "restrain the use of power of any government which interferes with religious liberty."

Oliver Thomas, special counsel for religious and civil liberties at the National Council of the Churches of Christ, said RLPA is not a complete solution but warned lawmakers not to penalize "the good because it's not the best."

Thomas said the First Amendment spells out particular freedoms of the press, speech and association and religion in a special way. While "strict scrutiny" still applies for clauses affecting speech and the press, "the anomaly is we don't have it under the religion clause anymore," he said.

"What we're asking for is not just that religion always wins, but that we at least have to go through the balancing of interests so that religion can win unless there is a good reason for it not to," Thomas said.

Other opponents said RLPA could threaten the civil rights of gays and others claiming a religious motive behind discrimination.

Christopher Anders, legislative counsel for the American Civil Liberties Union, said the law "is consistent with the ACLU's position favoring stronger protection of religious exercise, ... but our concern is that some courts may turn RLPA's shield for religious exercise into a sword against civil rights."

Anders said civil-rights laws should be exempted from the scope of the law.

But Brent Walker, general counsel for the Baptist Joint Committee, said "there should be no carve-outs to religious liberty, even for good causes such as non-discrimination." Walker said the law is designed to allow courts to balance the two fundamental principles of religious freedom and civil rights.

In a prepared statement, Walker told lawmakers that "if a court finds a compelling interest in enforcing non-discrimination, including on the basis of sexual orientation, that claim will prevail; where the interest cannot be shown, the religious-liberty claim will prevail."

Marci Hamilton, the lawyer who argued successfully before the Supreme Court against RFRA, said the new law "is an example of a Congress with good intentions but intent on giving religion supreme authority."

"If this bill is passed in its current form, you will be making a decision in a vast array of arenas that religion trumps other important social interests when they're engaged in commerce," Hamilton told lawmakers. She also predicted RLPA would lead to increased litigation.

But Steven McFarland, director of Christian Legal Society's Center for Law and Religious Freedom, said, "Our first freedom is being steam-rolled regularly and reducing litigation is not the highest virtue and certainly doesn't trump our first freedom."

RLPA was also introduced last Congress but lost momentum when sponsors removed commerce provisions to appease critics. But Canady told Associated Baptist Press he would push the bill forward with the commerce provisions this term.

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