



# Associated Baptist Press

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- Former SBC president urges dialogue at international gay-church convention
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- Retired OBU president named inductee to state hall of fame
- Construction-themed VBS material helps build homes through Habitat

## Former SBC president urges dialogue at international gay-church convention

By Bob Allen

LOS ANGELES (ABP) -- Former Southern Baptist Convention president Jimmy Allen called for dialogue that reaches across differences at an international convention of the world's largest homosexual church.

"We've been talking past each other, and it's time for us to talk to each other," Allen told 1,500 members of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches July 16 in Los Angeles.

Allen, 71, said he was willing to speak to the group because of his family's struggle with AIDS. One of his sons, Skip, is gay and HIV-positive. The wife of another son, Scott, got the HIV virus from a blood transfusion and passed it on to her two sons. All three died from AIDS.

When they turned to the church for help, they found rejection. Allen told the story in a 1995 book, "Burden of a Secret."

When Scott Allen learned in 1985 his wife and sons were infected, he went to the pastor of the Disciples of Christ church in Colorado where he worked as a staff member. He was fired on the spot. Later, as the family sought to place their boys in Sunday school, church after church turned them away.

"I found out something about perfect love that casts out fear," Allen told the church gathering. In our case, fear cast out perfect love."

"We all felt the shaft of pain to be untouchable. Nobody should be untouchable," he said in a line that brought the crowd to its feet.

Allen made it clear to his audience that he disagreed with them in that he believes homosexual acts are contrary to the Bible.

In a telephone interview July 19 from his home in Big Canoe, Ga., Allen said he felt like God led him to accept the invitation to speak to the largely homosexual group.

"I really went because I needed to say to them that parents who didn't agree with them could still love them," Allen told Associated Baptist Press. "So many of them are estranged and hurt."

Ian Taylor, media coordinator for the convention, said Allen's speech had a "phenomenal impact" on the gathering. He said Allen received 12 standing ovations during the message.

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Despite his warm reception, Allen's invitation caused some controversy.

Metropolitan Community Church founder and moderator Troy Perry, a former Southern Baptist pastor, told the Los Angeles Times that about 20 percent of his church's members came from Baptist churches where they felt unwelcome because of their sexual orientation.

But Perry defended the decision to invite Allen, whom he met last year at an AIDS awareness conference.

"After 30 years, if we're not mature enough to hear from someone who disagrees with us theologically, then there's something wrong with us," Perry said.

The newspaper also quoted an unnamed Southern Baptist Convention spokesman in Nashville, Tenn., as saying that Allen's appearance might cause some Baptists to worry he may be "forwarding the agenda" of the predominantly gay and lesbian denomination.

Allen told ABP he was not overly concerned about his decision to speak to the group being criticized or misunderstood. He said he is not involved in advancing any agenda of the Metropolitan Community Church, which claims 42,000 members in 15 countries.

Still, news reports called Allen's appearance a watershed in lesbian and gay churches' efforts to win acceptance among mainline Christians. Also attending the conference was John Thomas, the incoming president of the United Church of Christ, a liberal Protestant group that ordains homosexuals and approves of blessing same-sex unions.

Allen, who has spoken on the subject many times since writing "Burden of a Secret," said the change in churches' attitudes about AIDS "has been significant" and "in some places, it's been very encouraging."

More than 2,500 churches and religious organizations have begun working in AIDS ministries in the four years since the book's release, Allen said.

"Every church which rejected us is now in an active AIDS ministry, including the Disciples church that fired Scott," Allen said. He said he and his son returned to lead an AIDS workshop at the church three years ago, which helped heal hurt feelings.

"We've had a climate change," he said, "partly because of better information, partly because of the call to compassion."

However, he said, there remains in many churches "a vast indifference and inattention" to the needs of people suffering from AIDS. "We also have a false assumption that the epidemic is over, because we've found some medications that can keep people alive a little longer."

"It's a mixed report," he said. "We have more people getting into caring ministries in churches than ever before. On the other hand, we've had a studied avoidance of the challenge by so many congregations."

Allen is chaplain for a mountain resort community in Georgia. He is retired president of the Southern Baptist Radio and Television Commission. He was SBC president in 1978-79 and was also active in forming the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization of moderate Southern Baptists, in 1991.

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## **Theologian joins faculty at Campbell divinity school**

BUIES CREEK, N.C. (ABP) -- A 31-year-old expert in theology of the church fathers has joined the faculty at Campbell University Divinity School.

Steven Harmon of Fort Worth, Texas, has been named assistant professor of Christian theology at the Baptist-affiliated school in Buies Creek, N.C.

He is a graduate of Howard Payne University with a master's and a doctorate from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Michael Cogdill, dean of the Campbell divinity school, predicted the young scholar would make a strong impact. "Time will prove him to be one of the emerging young theologians among Baptists," he said.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Retired OBU president named inductee to state hall of fame**

SHAWNEE, Okla. (ABP) -- Former Oklahoma Baptist University President Bob Agee will be inducted this fall into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame.

Agee was president of the Baptist-affiliated school in Shawnee from 1982 until his retirement in 1998. He currently is executive director of the Association of Southern Baptist Colleges and Schools.

Agee will be one of 10 new members inducted into the Hall of Fame, which honors contributions to higher education in Oklahoma, Oct. 5 in Oklahoma City.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Construction-themed VBS material helps build homes through Habitat**

By Jeff Huett

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- The "drillers," "painters," "nailers" and "dump trucks" showed up at Hendricks Avenue Baptist Church in Jacksonville, Fla. But these 3-year-olds through sixth graders weren't on hand for a construction project. They came for Bible school.

The church was among early users of a new vacation Bible school program, "Under Construction," produced by Smyth and Helwys Publishing in Macon, Ga., in partnership with Habitat for Humanity. It not only uses a construction theme for teaching kids about God but actually helps build new homes. A portion of each purchase goes to Habitat for Humanity International.

Curriculum coordinator Tom Harrington said the concept is to combine biblical principles with real missions.

"The overall goal is to offer a ministry-minded vacation Bible school that is extraordinarily relevant to where we are today," said Harrington, who has since been named editor of the Uniform Series Bible Study at Smyth and Helwys. "We wanted to link the vacation Bible school to a mission endeavor that's out there, instead of something like a trip to the moon."

Along with their daily Bible stories and some Habitat-related activities, children get daily snippets of the Habitat story, said Betsy Van Deusen, director of church relations for Habitat for Humanity International.

Habitat for Humanity affiliates, which are located in 64 countries with 1,500 located in the United States, work to provide affordable housing to those needy families who qualify. Qualifications include the applicant's need for housing, the income the applicant is presently paying for rent and his or her ability to make payments on a 20- to 25-year interest-free mortgage.

Volunteer groups perform the construction, as well as mandatory "sweat hours" required of the future homeowners. Van Deusen said 500 hours of service is required of the new homeowners on either their own house or that of another qualified Habitat applicant.

The Under Construction curriculum was designed in the workstation format where the children move from one station to another in 30-minute increments throughout the day. The stations include "Blueprints," where children participate in Bible activities; "Break Time," where children are served refreshments and then they play; and "Scales and Measures," where they play music and sing. They work on craft projects in the "Hard Hat Area" and hear community stories in "Survey."

The curriculum includes activity ideas and stories for leaders to use in emphasizing the daily Bible passages and themes. The themes deal with community issues and include lessons on caring, sharing, learning, worshiping and celebrating.

Instead of actually participating in the construction of a Habitat home, those attending the Bible school are asked to give an offering and provide some of their VBS projects that would be forwarded by each individual church to the Habitat offices and local affiliates. Habitat will also receive an unspecified sliding-scale percentage from the sale of the curriculum.

Harrington refused to say how many churches have ordered the curriculum, calling it "company information," but said the number was "in the thousands."

Van Deusen said getting the word out about Habitat and encouraging the next generation of Habitat house-builders was the organization's main goal in the combined effort with Smyth and Helwys, but getting the kids' parents involved was also important.

"We know that behind every little kid, there is a big kid, so introducing Habitat to adults was a goal," she said.

Jenny Foster, the minister to children at Hendricks Avenue Baptist, said the vacation Bible school went right along with her church's involvement in HabiJax, a local Habitat affiliate, but commented some of the Bible stories and activities may have been too advanced for the children.

"Anytime you get curriculum, it's not going to be what you expect it to be," Foster said. "Some of it, you just look at it and say 'this is not going to work with our kids.'"

But Harrington said Smyth and Helwys has been "flooded with compliments," on the curriculum. "We have never received this volume of orders or this many pats on the back and 'at-a-boys for our content.'"

He added the material is meant to be used as a resource and can be adapted if necessary.

Sue Stello, program director for Aldersgate United Methodist Church in North Charleston, S.C., did just that. Unhappy with the curriculum her denomination had chosen for use in vacation Bible schools this year, she decided to try something different. And with people in her region still rebuilding from 1989's Hurricane Hugo, the Habitat theme was something tailor-made for the Carolinas.

"We used the curriculum as a resource and built around it," Stello said. "We read what the curriculum said for us to do, make and see and then added some of our own ideas that we thought were better."

The vacation Bible school at Aldersgate was held during the evenings for a week and included the parents as well as their children. Speakers from local Habitat affiliates, as well as other Bible study leaders were brought in to lead the parents' while the children did activities. The church also held a special Habitat emphasis on the Sunday preceding the vacation Bible school week.

"Everything was theologically sound and used both the Old and the New Testament," she said. "Our people were encouraged and touched by the whole thing, and it will only help in our efforts for Habitat nationally and locally in South Carolina."

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