



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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Texas Baptist committee formed to highlight environmental concerns

By Ken Camp

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- "Green" churches, "earthkeeping" and "environmental justice" may not yet be familiar terms in many churches, but a committee named by the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission wants that to change.

The ethics and moral-issues arm of the Baptist General Convention of Texas formed a committee two years ago to identify and find ways to educate church leaders about environmental issues.

Dudley Burton, professor of environmental studies at Baylor University, led the 12-member environmental stewardship committee, working closely with Terri Morgan, coordinator of special projects and community ministry for the Texas CLC. It also included educators, pastors and lay people.

The group developed a series of initiatives focused on the local church, partnerships between denominational entities and public policy.

Members also planned a national conference on religion and the environment, scheduled Oct. 11-12 at Baylor University, as well as two regional conferences in the Lubbock and Houston areas in partnership with the Hardin-Simmons University's Logsdon School of Theology.

Best-selling author Tony Campolo will be a keynote speaker at the national conference on environmental stewardship at Baylor. "Caring for Creation" is the theme of the meeting in Waco, jointly sponsored by Baylor's Department of Environmental Studies and the Texas Baptist CLC.

The conference will include breakout sessions on topics such as global warming, biodiversity and sustainability, in addition to examination of theological issues such as "Kinship with Creation" and "Redeeming the Earth."

At the congregational level, the environmental-stewardship committee is encouraging "green church" initiatives. The focus is on incorporating the celebration of creation into worship services and teaching about stewardship of the earth into the church's educational programs.

The Christian Life Commission is identifying existing resources, developing new materials, and putting together a speaker's bureau of volunteers who can lead seminars, workshops and worship services on environmental themes.

To encourage churches to "think globally and act locally," the CLC also has begun an environmental-justice awards program. The program provides small one-year grants to help churches and other Christian entities launch projects designed to make an impact in local communities.

Two of the first recipients were Highland Lakes Encampment at Spicewood and Chapparral Assembly in Iowa Park. This summer, the Baptist encampments held children's camps that had themes relating to care for God's creation.

The committee also led the CLC to include several environmental justice issues among its public policy priorities during the most recent session of the Texas Legislature.

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Baptists mix with 'others' at retreat on spirituality

By Relma Hargus

MARS HILL, N.C. (ABP) -- An Episcopal priest, Quaker minister and Benedictine monk were among the leaders at a late July gathering of "Baptists and others" interested in spirituality.

But the official workshop portions of the retreat were not the only times when growth, encouragement and reflection occurred, said Paula Clayton Dempsey, one of the workshop coordinators.

"We deliberately scheduled freedom into the program so the participants could also learn from each other as they were sitting around the table or walking through the campus," said Dempsey, campus minister at Mars Hill College in North Carolina, where the sixth annual "Gathering" was held.

The conference theme of "Patterns of the Sacred" -- based on Romans 12:1-2 -- found expression in a variety of ways during the week. Among them were a display of fabric art by Kathy Spencer, a quiltmaker and member of First Baptist Church in Asheville, N.C., and a hymn composed by Tom Turner, one of the workshop coordinators and founder of Pilgrim's Rest Retreat Center in Greenville, S.C.

Participants chose from any or all of the three retreats offered through the week, which began July 25. Donna Scott, an Episcopal priest, pastoral counselor and director of Stillpoint School for Spiritual Direction and Contemplative Prayer in Nashville, Tenn., led one retreat for "spiritual guides."

Lynda Poston Smith, a renowned soprano, composer and retreat leader from Fort Worth, Texas, provided music throughout the week, including an impromptu lesson in how to sing "Miriam's Song" during a session on psalms of praise led by Turner.

Among retreat participants were a number of seminary students, including 10 on scholarships provided by the Alliance of Baptists. The students led morning and evening prayers.

Sam Weber, a Benedictine monk and priest who is professor of spiritual formation at Wake Forest Divinity School in Winston-Salem, N.C., concluded the week with a retreat focused on adapting the Rule of St. Benedict as a guide for the spiritual journeys of modern Christians.

The Benedictine emphasis, dating from the Middle Ages, on bed, board and hearth finds its equivalent in a family where each member is willing to sacrifice, to let go of something for love of the larger group, Weber said.

"Discussion (the stage beyond 'conversation') only works if something dies in both," he said.

Other advice Weber dispensed based on the Benedictine Rule included the following:

-- "When chaos occurs, begin the work of creating order again."

-- "Theology begins with the word 'Listen.'"

-- "Guests are to be received as Christ himself."

-- "The whole purpose of life is connection and relationship -- with God and one another."

-- "'I need help' are three very important words."

-- "Allow for a 40 percent mess-up factor -- more if necessary."

-- "Not forgiving someone is like holding a glass of poison and drinking it so the other person will die."

One's prayer life must have both a spontaneous component as well as a structured one, Weber said. Benedictine nuns and monks follow a daily liturgical schedule that allows them to pray the Psalms and to read the Bible through each year. Weber said the structured aspect of prayer says to God, "I make the decision to set aside the time to be with you." Not "feeling" like maintaining such a regular commitment is not an excuse, he said. "Love is not so much a feeling as it is a decision. ... Just do it and it will teach you."

Betty Haywood, a spiritual director from Asheville who led a workshop on "centering" prayer, also stressed the need to be regular in one's praying. She recommended setting aside 20 minutes in the morning and early evening of each day for centering, or meditative, prayer.

Centering prayer is the practice of moving beyond thoughts, words and emotions to simply sit in the presence of God without an agenda, she said.

Centering prayer is not "a relaxation exercise, a method to achieve a spiritual high or for a privileged few," she said.

"Centering prayer is not meant to replace prayer; it simply puts other kinds of prayer, like petition, praise and thanksgiving, into a new and fuller perspective," she said. "It is the cultivator of the soul from which contemplative prayer can spring."

"Joining a centering-prayer support group that prays and shares together once a week helps establish one's relationship to Christ through prayer," she said. Haywood facilitates such a group in Asheville.

Other prayer retreat leaders were Sara Beth Terrell, a spiritual guide and Society of Friends (Quaker) minister, and Turner. Weber also introduced chanting techniques to use in praying the Psalms.

Terrell compared the practice of "lectio divina," or sacred reading, to being at a banquet. Using that analogy, the first step -- stopping at the word or phrase that speaks to you while reading or listening to Scripture -- would be "seeing all the food and popping a morsel into your mouth," she said.

"Meditatio" would then be "chewing on the word or phrase" by saying it over and over again. "Oratio" becomes "swallowing" as one "talks to God going wherever that word or phrase leads you."

The final stage, "contemplatio," is "resting in God's presence," Terrell said. One of the participants suggested that "digestion" could be an appropriate word choice since the practice helps one to live in the Spirit.

Turner led two sessions on "Psalms and the Patterns of Prayer" with particular emphasis on the prayers of complaint since practically half the psalms fit into this category.

"These psalms provide a language and form to turn complaints into prayer by God's grace," Turner said.

They are an invitation to "be honest and candid with God -- to pitch a fit, to indulge yourself," Turner said. The pattern of these psalms also usually include an affirmation of faith that describes "the trust in God, no matter how small, the petitioner brings to the situation" as well as specific requests for action on the part of God, Turner said.

No matter how outrageous the request, we need not worry, Turner said.

"God will use our complaints to transform us and the situation. We don't have to tell God how to be God."

While leading "Patterns of Identity," the retreat for spiritual guides, Scott explored the parallels between spiritual development and personal maturity using the insights of developmental psychology.

At the same time, she cited the deficiencies of psychology.

"There is something going on with us that cannot be explained by psychological jargon," she said, citing examples of how the knowledge of being loved by God is often the moment that leads to emotional healing.

Being a spiritual director, or guide, takes courage as well as trust that God is at work in the process, Scott said. Images she finds helpful in describing the role are "midwife," "the desert guide who walks along the camel blowing the dust out of its eyes" and "the tiny fish that lives in the reefs and cleans the other fish as they swim by."

A dedication service for the Advent Spirituality Center -- "a space where Christian spirituality can be nurtured in a Baptist setting" -- took place July 30 in the Broyhill Chapel on the campus.

Next year The Gathering is scheduled July 23-29.

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Chinese Christian leader calls for flood relief help

SHANGHAI, China (ABP) -- Major floods have hit China for the second straight year, prompting the head of the nation's official Protestant church to issue a worldwide plea for relief help.

Millions of people have been affected by major floods which began in June in the lower reaches of the Yangtze River, according to Han Wenzao, president of the China Christian Council and general secretary for the Amity Foundation, the Chinese church's service arm.

Torrential rains and subsequent landslides have washed away entire villages in the southern mountainous region of Anhui. The floods also inundated lower plains, destroying crops. An estimated 600,000 people in Hui Province were reportedly living either in makeshift shacks on dikes, with relatives or in government shelters after their homes were destroyed or submerged.

One major need is medical supplies, the Chinese Christian leader said, including water-purification tablets and medicines for common ailments such as flu, colds and diarrhea. The Amity Foundation is accepting financial gifts to purchase medicines for flood relief.

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EDITOR'S NOTE: Checks for China flood relief should be payable to Amity Foundation and sent to the attention of relief coordinator Ms. Tan Li Ying, 71 Hankou Road, Nanjing, 210008, China. Gifts should be designated as "1999 Anhui Floods."

-- By ABP staff. Based on reporting by Faye Pearson.

Worship back to future for the new liturgicals

By Rob Marus and Marshall Allen

LYNCHBURG, Va. (ABP) -- With the explosive growth of contemporary worship in the past two decades, some Christians might think they've seen the last of liturgical worship. Think again.

Though still small, there is a movement back to the roots of ancient worship. It is surfacing in some unlikely places:

-- Some liturgical churches are attracting a new generation of worshipers seeking to connect with ancient traditions to counteract America's eclectic and rootless religious culture.

-- Some traditional evangelical churches are "blending" liturgical elements into worship for the first time.

-- And even some new-style churches are finding that Generation Xers respond to the counter-cultural nature of ancient worship. It's a far cry from the user-friendly contemporary worship predominant among baby boomers.

Not so long ago, liturgical worship -- a set ritual for public worship -- was considered anathema by many evangelicals, who come mostly from worship traditions centered on the Bible and evangelism. Many equate liturgical worship with the rituals of Roman Catholics and other sacramental traditions, which Protestants left behind at the Reformation. Others view the trappings of liturgy -- candles, stained glass, robes, banners -- as the kind of "churchy" things that turn contemporary non-Christians off to Christianity.

So why is liturgical worship becoming attractive again?

In part, advocates say, because it balances the rational, word-centered worship so popular since the Enlightenment with a re-emphasis on the senses, aesthetics and mystery. It also fits the postmodern's thirst for an experiential faith and a sense of community.

Rediscovering liturgy has worked for Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va. In fact, a new liturgical service there is growing faster than the church's popular contemporary service.

When he first came to Rivermont five years ago, Senior Pastor Jim Baucom led the church to move from a traditional, revivalist style of worship to a more "high-energy," contemporary service. That brought a dramatic turnaround and new growth in the 105-year-old congregation, which had seen a long period of decline.

But it also left some holes.

"A lot of the folks who have come in have been left with a hunger for a more contemplative worship experience," says Baucom. "In particular, the Gen-Xers who have come into the church have asked for something very traditional, and they don't mean Second-Great-Awakening Baptist. They mean ancient."

Baucom and his staff studied ancient worship methods and patterns that would fit Baptist theology and tradition. That didn't take them back to Catholic or Orthodox liturgies but to ancient Celtic forms of worship.

Rivermont started a Celtic service that includes readings from ancient Irish, Scottish and Welsh poetry, plus Celtic-themed songs that date back as far as the fifth century (such as the classic "Be Thou My Vision").

"It's a very mystical, mysterious and contemplative type of worship experience," Baucom says.

Candles light the sanctuary and the ministers wear robes patterned after the vestments of ancient monks and friars. Bagpipes and violins replace drums and electric guitars. No contemporary worship choruses are sung.

At the end of its first year, about 150 people are attending the Celtic service, while about 350 attend the contemporary "celebration" service. Both are growing.

Baucom says one of the most unusual aspects of the two services is the type of worshippers they tend to attract. While the contemporary service is filled with baby boomers, they are all but absent in the Celtic service. It attracts mostly Gen-Xers, with a healthy minority of the church's older members included.

"I would call it a crowd of the premoderns and the postmoderns," Baucom says.

Another interesting marriage emerging among the new liturgicals is between charismatics and Episcopalians.

In the early 1990s, the lay leadership and pastoral staff of Hosanna Fellowship, an independent charismatic church near Kansas City, embarked on a study of church history. It led them to incorporate more liturgical elements into their worship services -- robes for ministers, a divided chancel (with pulpit on one side and lectern on the other) and communion every Sunday.

Now known as the Cathedral of Christ the King, the Olathe, Kan., congregation became part of the Charismatic Episcopal Church -- a new denomination founded in 1992.

From three churches in 1992, the Charismatic Episcopal Church has grown to more than 600. It follows a very traditional Anglican worship order, the same that congregations of the Episcopal Church and Church of England have followed for centuries.

The ministers -- called "vicars" and "rectors" -- wear robes and stoles and burn incense in worship services. But these Episcopalians add earnest worship songs, hand-raising and even episodes of speaking in tongues to the services.

John Sweeney, 33, was among those who led the liturgical shift at Christ the King. Sweeney, a priest-in-residence at the church, says he found both his early Baptist background and his later charismatic involvement less than satisfying.

In becoming liturgical, he says, "we felt that sense of comfort in that we were joining something that had been going on for 2,000 years. Joining back in historic faith and worship gives you a sense of rootedness -- the sense that things don't change."

Randy Sly, 50, archbishop of the denomination's Eastern Province, says many of its members come from evangelical, charismatic and Pentecostal backgrounds but embrace the Episcopal tradition because they are seeking more structure, tradition and stability.

"The Greek word for liturgy -- 'leitourgeia' -- literally means 'the work of the people,'" Sly explained. "We have a real desire for people to be participants in worship and not spectators."

Participation in worship is a renewed emphasis for more than charismatics.

Evangelical author Robert Webber, founder of the Institute for Worship Studies, encourages all evangelicals to re-examine ancient church traditions to make worship more participatory.

Webber, a professor at Wheaton College and author of "Evangelicals on the Canterbury Trail," is an evangelical who became an Episcopalian in a search of more spiritual depth and connectedness to ancient Christianity.

In recent years, he says, worship in many evangelical churches -- both traditional and contemporary -- has focused more on entertainment than participation. "In most of our churches, people don't sing anymore, because it's performance."

He advocates structuring worship around a model -- a "liturgy" -- that imitates the ancient church's order of worship.

"The kind of worship we have developed is highly participatory," says Webber, who has produced a video series to teach worship leaders to incorporate the ancient ways. "The best way to describe it is that it draws from the ancient Western tradition and the best of the charismatic traditions."

Webber recommends, for instance, that a ceremonial Bible be carried through the congregation as part of an opening processional. Communion should be celebrated as often as possible and at the front of the sanctuary so that worshipers make personal contact with those serving the wine and bread.

Webber says the ancient rituals will connect with the post-baby boom generations. "Millennials [those in the generation following Gen-X] are looking for something that is participatory and event-oriented."

But don't expect young adults to flock back to existing liturgical churches, warns Paul Basden, author

of "The Worship Maze." Liturgy is coming back, he agrees, "but it's not coming back in the same form."

Churches that attract young adults will have to make room for their unique worship expressions, particularly their music, says Basden, a pastor in Birmingham, Ala.

"Some traditional pastors will smile and say, 'Give it long enough and the contemporary worship services will return to their liturgical roots.' But when they return, they will change liturgical churches dramatically."

In the case of Gen-Xers, "what we may see is 'grunge liturgy,'" he notes.

Like Webber, Basden has written about blending worship styles -- and he says some blend better than others. Combining liturgical and charismatic styles can work, he says, when it is approached "intentionally," as with Christ the King. But it is less likely to work for worshipers over 30.

Liturgy is attractive to the post-boomer generations because of its emphasis on community, leaders agree. "The boomer generation promised us a new world, but they didn't deliver," Webber says. Following the boomer-led suburbanization and strip-malling of America, younger generations feel isolated and are desperate for community.

In liturgical worship, communion is the centerpiece of community building. Sly says communion connects believers to each other as well as to the past. "I think a lot of young people are looking for a faith that isn't going to change on them. They are looking for things that are stable."

Liturgical worship stimulates all of the senses. The smell of incense, the sight of bright colors and banners, and the architecture make it a multisensory experience. That's perfect for the postmodern era, says Webber.

"We are currently experiencing a revolution in communication whereby we are moving from verbal to symbolic means of expression," he says. "The symbolism is a part of the text of worship."

And liturgical worship emphasizes the mystery and transcendence of God over rationalism and familiarity.

In the modernist period, which tried to explain the complexities of life and faith, the concept of the mystery of God got short shrift. In the new postmodern world, many believers don't feel the same "need to know" as their predecessors and are more comfortable with a God who can't always be dissected.

"The liturgical style is more serious about mystery, and ties it into a direct way of life," says Dean Borgman, a professor at Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary near Boston. "This is attractive to Gen-Xers because mystery provides a more satisfactory solution than the cognitive explanations of suffering, tragedy and the cross. Protestants tend to explain these things, and postmodern folks don't accept the explanations. The mystery suggests that things aren't supposed to be explained."

Robert Webber agrees: "We're done with 'evidence that demands a verdict.' Answers aren't that cheap, and they're tough to come by. ... But now we don't need to understand."

Perhaps what's hardest to come by is a balance between the intellectual and mystical aspects of faith. The celebration of the mystical can internalize faith to the point that it removes worshipers from the real world. Without the mystical, however, cognitive theology degenerates into a purely intellectual exercise.

The best kind of liturgical worship does not divide what one knows of God from the celebration of God's mysterious ways.

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-- Rob Marus is a journalist in Jefferson City, Mo. Marshall Allen is an administrator for Young Life International in Colorado Springs, Colo. This article appeared originally in *FaithWorks* magazine and is used with permission.

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