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IN THIS ISSUE:

- For Baptists, church music ends the century about where it started
- Experts list shapers of Baptist church music
- Talk about 'our' worship rather than 'my' worship, Greer advises
- Justices hear arguments on program furnishing computers to parochial schools
- Henry named administrator at Baptist Joint Committee

For Baptists, church music ends the century about where it started

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- In the eyes of one church leader, the situation was dire. Hymns were being replaced in Baptist churches by more popular, contemporary tunes, and the use of the traditional hymnal was fading.

So this church leader wrote: "For some years it has been apparent that the rage for novelties in singing ... has been driving out the use of the old, precious, standard hymns. They are not memorized as of old. They are scarcely sung at all. They are not contained in the non-denominational songbooks, which in many churches have usurped the places of our old hymnbooks. We cannot afford to lose these old hymns. ... But the young people today are unfamiliar with them and will seldom hear any of them if the present tendency goes on untouched."

Although it sounds like 1999, the year actually was 1891, and the writer was Basil Manly Jr., a founding professor of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary.

Manly's lament was published in the preface to his own hymnal, called "The Choice: A Selection of Approved Hymns for Baptist Churches."

The target of Manly's frustration was the so-called "gospel song," which began gaining influence in the late 19th century. These simple and popular songs grew out of the Sunday-school movement, camp-meeting revivals and folk song traditions.

Despite the way they were widely used, to the chagrin of Manly and other purists, those who wrote and taught these gospel songs never meant for them to replace hymns in church worship, said Paul Richardson, professor of church music at Samford University in Birmingham, Ala.

"Many of the people who wrote gospel songs said very clearly that this was not intended to be the main music for worship in the church," Richardson said. "It was intended to serve an outreach function. I think that tends to be true of most of the popular styles that come along. They're really intended to be used for outreach rather than nourishing people in the church."

Manly, who came from the more formal Charleston tradition in Southern Baptist life, preferred the classic 18th and 19th century hymns for worship. So did many other church leaders. But the people in the pew, many of whom had come to faith through revival meetings where gospel songs were the norm, favored the newer music for sentimental as well as practical reasons.

"There was the influence of people attending the revival meetings and wanting to go home and experience the same kind of emotional catharsis in their churches," added David Music, professor of church music at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. "The gospel song started out as para-church. ... They weren't trying to start a movement, but it happened through example."

Fast forward 100 years, and divergent opinions about church music still exist. Today the battle is hymns versus praise choruses.

With regard to church music among Baptists, the 20th century is ending much like it began, according to a variety of music historians.

"Choruses and contemporary Christian music may be the gospel song of today," Music said.

"One of the things I find interesting is that the gospel song relied on the popular music of the day, like the march or the waltz," he explained. "It was basically the musical style of Stephen Foster. Now with the praise chorus and contemporary Christian music, we're doing the same thing -- it's just a different style."

This notion of starting and ending the century on the same note is more true of Southern Baptists than most other Protestant denominations in the United States, Music said.

That's in part because a major influence on Southern Baptists throughout the century has been revivalism, he said. "You can see that reflected in the fact that gospel songs ... continued to be popular with Southern Baptists when most other denominations moved on to something else."

Even B.B. McKinney, Southern Baptists' best-known and most prolific hymn writer of the 20th century, "wrote pretty much in 19th century gospel-song style," he explained.

The similarities in church-music issues between the beginning and the close of the 20th century reach beyond conflicts over musical styles, the historians all pointed out.

Consider hymnals.

At the beginning of the century, Southern Baptists had nothing resembling a common hymnal. Hymnals, or songbooks, varied widely from one church to the next, and many Baptist churches used hymnals from non-denominational publishers.

It was not until after World War II, and approaching mid-century, that you could walk into most any Southern Baptist church and find the same hymnal as in your home church, said Bill Reynolds, distinguished professor of church music at Southwestern Seminary and editor of the 1975 Baptist Hymnal.

The Broadman Hymnal, published by the Southern Baptist Convention's Sunday School Board in 1940, and the 1956 Baptist Hymnal achieved an unprecedented uniformity in hymnody among Southern Baptists, Reynolds said.

The Broadman Hymnal "probably shaped Southern Baptist worship more than any other book except the Bible," church historian Leon McBeth has written.

Such standardization was to be short-lived, however. By the time the SBC again published a hymnal -- 1975 -- the Baptist church-music scene was beginning to feel the influences of the Jesus movement, the charismatic movement and a return to folk-music influences. A wide variety of hymnals and songbooks were available to churches from a variety of publishers, and churches began once again to make individual decisions based more on their own worship styles than on denominational identity.

The old had become new again.

Yet in between these similar starting and ending points, much change occurred. It was during the 20th century -- and more precisely during the last two-thirds of the century -- that music became an institutional presence in Southern Baptist churches, the historians explained.

The trend of churches hiring music ministers started during this period, as did the idea of having age-graded choirs. SBC seminaries saw the need to train church musicians, with Southwestern Seminary being the first to open a school of gospel music early in the century.

The Sunday School Board created its church music department in 1935, an action that had a ripple effect through churches and state conventions. During the next 10 years, most state conventions established church-music departments of their own.

Musical training blossomed in Baptist churches, with training for young and old alike. This influence fed the youth-choir bonanza of the 1960s and 1970s, as well as the growth of large adult choirs in Baptist churches today, said Sam Prestidge, retired music director for the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Prestidge said he is amazed at the level of musical difficulty church choirs routinely tackle today, a feat made possible by years of music education.

"When I went to Baylor in 1946, we spent all fall working on the 'Messiah.' Now churches do it in two or three weeks. ... It's amazing what choirs are doing nowadays, and the size of some of them."

Some church-music leaders fear this advancement may prove to be short-lived, though.

The impetus for serious church-music education and a greater understanding of the role of music in worship "had its zenith and decline in the same century," said Don Hustad, distinguished professor of church music at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

"We had a short period in which we emphasized strong worship and classic hymnody," he said. "We emphasized higher education. Musicians began to get doctor's degrees for the first time. There was increased professional development in the church. But beginning in 1960 comes the new celebration era. The charismatic movement is literally born. People are not concerned any more with what is correct in liturgy but with what is practical. We began to move from a cerebral approach to ... emotions becoming the apex of what we're concerned about."

What the future holds, no one seems willing to speculate.

In Baptist congregations across the nation, virtual battle lines have been drawn over worship styles. Churches continue to purchase hymnals, but at the same time they increasingly project words to hymns and choruses on large screens. Some churches market themselves like radio stations: all contemporary all the time or all oldies all the time.

"At the end of the century, music has become the determining feature of worship," Hustad noted. "Music is the prime feature of worship in our day. Some have said it is the new denominationalism -- we choose our church according to its music."

In the seminaries, church-music educators struggle to know how to respond.

"Our church-music schools are really wrestling with the question of how they're going to attract students and when they get there what they're going to teach them," Hustad said. "Classical church music is really in question in the modern church. So how do you train people?"

In denominational offices, leaders also are searching for answers, even questioning whether it would be wise to publish a printed-and-hardbound hymnal the next time around.

It's been nearly a decade since the SBC's last hymnal project, and officials at LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, Tenn., are beginning to think about what comes next, said Mark Blankenship, director of LifeWay's church-music program.

"I think churches are going to be influenced incredibly by the electronic culture in the future," Blankenship said. "The whole concept of electronic publishing is already here. It's not feasible to do it right now because not every church and every buyer has the technology equipment to handle it. But someone in their church probably does."

But it's premature to write off hymns and more traditional liturgy forever, Blankenship insisted.

While the majority of young people in churches today are leaning toward contemporary praise and worship music, "there is a group that is holding on to a style of music that is more traditional," he said.

"We're going to see in the next 30 to 40 years the development of a new hymnody. There is going to be the development of a lot of hymnic, gospel-song and hymn material that is in a different musical style."

New young writers are "going to be writing some new 'How Firm A Foundations,' some new 'Amazing Graces' that state the gospel, but in contemporary vernacular," Blankenship predicted.

Music agreed, noting that the number of new hymns already being written could make the late 20th century the "second golden age of English hymnody."

That's ironic, he admitted, given the parallel trend toward praise choruses. Perhaps the only way to explain the dichotomy is through a phrase coined by another scholar, he said. That author talks about "convergence worship" rather than blended worship.

Some churches are finding they can "follow the Christian year and sing choruses," Music said. "Whether that will be the wave of the future or die out, who knows?"

-30-

Experts list shapers of Baptist church music

(ABP) -- Following are some prominent people who shaped Baptist church music in the 20th century:

-- Dwight L. Moody and Ira Sankey. Moody, a prominent evangelist and namesake of the Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, was a major influence on Baptist worship at the turn of the century. Sankey was Moody's singer for evangelistic crusades, and his name became synonymous with the gospel-song tradition.

-- Robert H. Coleman. A Baptist layman, Coleman served as an associate to George W. Truett, pastor of First Baptist Church of Dallas. He not only was one of the first individuals in Baptist life who could be called a "music minister," but was most noted as a publisher of hymnals. Between 1909 and 1939, he published 33 collections of hymns.

-- I.E. Reynolds. Raised in rural Alabama, Reynolds came under the influence of Dwight L. Moody during an 1894 revival in Birmingham. He later attended Moody Bible Institute before launching a career of his own as an evangelistic singer. L.R. Scarborough brought him on the faculty of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in 1915 as music director and ultimately as director of the gospel music department. Reynolds was a strident advocate for "better" music in Baptist churches, a viewpoint he extolled in 40 articles published in the Baptist Standard from 1915 to 1945. His advocacy also led to creation of a church-music department at the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board.

-- B.B. McKinney. Southern Baptists' most prolific and best-known hymn writer of this century, McKinney taught in the School of Sacred Music at Southwestern Seminary from 1919 to 1931, then moved to Nashville, Tenn., to launch the Sunday School Board's church-music department. He frequently led music at crusades and summer assemblies, most notably at Falls Creek in southern Oklahoma. He was editor of the 1940 Broadman Hymnal, the first hymnal to create a common worship culture among Southern Baptists. McKinney also wrote 149 gospel hymns and songs and composed the music for 114 texts written by others. His best-known songs include "The Nail-Scarred Hand," "Let Others See Jesus in You," "Speak to My Heart" and "Wherever He Leads I'll Go."

-- William J. Reynolds. Considered Southern Baptists' foremost authority on hymnody, he became the first Baptist to be elected president of the Hymn Society of America. He also has received the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers. Reynolds led the

Sunday School Board's church music department nearly 20 years and was editor of the 1975 Baptist Hymnal. He was responsible for introducing the first contemporary Christian music into the Baptist Hymnal and led the Sunday School Board to publish the first youth musicals that shaped a generation of baby boomers. He has taught at Southwestern Seminary the past 20 years.

-- Other contemporary writers and singers. Perhaps because it's too early to gauge their long-term impact, singling out a few of the individuals who have been prominent in the contemporary Christian music scene was too daunting for the church-music historians interviewed for this report. Composers such as Ralph Carmichael, Kurt Kaiser and Bill and Gloria Gaither were mentioned by some as examples of those whose influence helped bring contemporary Christian music and praise choruses into Baptist congregations.

This list was compiled based on interviews with David Music of Southwestern Seminary, Paul Richardson of Samford University, Don Hustad of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Mark Blankenship of LifeWay Christian Resources and Sam Prestidge, retired state music director for Texas Baptists. Not all names suggested were included, although the individuals highlighted here were commonly mentioned by almost all those interviewed.

-30-

-- By Mark Wingfield

Talk about 'our' worship rather than 'my' worship, Greer advises

By Marv Knox

LEWISVILLE, Texas (ABP) -- Churches could resolve their "worship wars" by changing pronouns, songwriter/composer Bruce Greer suggests.

"They could talk about 'our' worship, not 'my' worship and what 'I' want," explained Greer, who won a 1999 Dove Award for his musical, "Mary, Did You Know?"

Greer points to the congregation where he grew up, Mobberly Baptist Church in Longview, Texas, as an example of peaceful harmonization of a variety of musical tastes in worship.

"I didn't know there were churches that were uptight about worship," he noted. His music minister, Dale Perkins, used traditional hymns, praise choruses and even classical anthems in worship three decades ago.

"We weren't charismatic, but we weren't afraid to be physical in worship. We sang praise choruses, and we clapped. And yet we also enjoyed stirring, thoughtful anthems that had been sung for centuries. The seniors sang choruses with us and loved it, but we joined them in singing 'A Mighty Fortress is Our God,' and we were moved by the powerful message.

"All musical territory was everybody's territory. It wasn't 'me and mine.' It was 'ours.'"

Today, however, many congregations square off into battle formations over music in worship, observed Greer, who worships with a different church almost every weekend as he travels presenting concerts and participating in worship.

"Where there is a push for exclusive music, usually it's contemporary," he said.

"Usually, that's because the pastor wants to reach more people, and he thinks worship has got to be contemporary. He says, 'There's this church over there that runs 1,000 more than we do, and we can too, if we have a contemporary service.' However, people will come in spite of musical style if truth is proclaimed in a spirit of love. I see it every weekend in many churches across our country."

Some churches have tried to make peace by developing a "blended" worship style, Greer reported. "In theory, this works. However, in practice, a lot of 'blended' music is scrambled music," he insisted. "Instead of what it is -- diverse songs in diverse styles -- it's homogenized."

Piano, bass and drums added on a traditional hymn are not bad in and of themselves, but worshippers who prefer traditional hymns are offended when they never are allowed to hear their favorite hymns in a traditional style, he said. Likewise, sometimes the organ overshadows choruses, and they no longer sound contemporary.

For example, praise choruses can be very effective when they are sung in a contemporary style with the use of keyboards, guitars and drums, he said. Similarly, hymns can be just as effective sung in their simplicity without extensive instrumentation or arrangement. These melodies can be enhanced with just organ and piano.

"A major part of the problem is an over-emphasis or following a formula for worship," he said.

"To make worship flow from celebration to intimacy, it is thought that music never should pause or breathe and cannot move through different styles," he said. "A lot of people are worried about worship being awkward. Silence is not to be feared. The Scripture says, 'Be still, and know that I am God.'

"I don't think there is just one approach to leading people in worship through music. Creativity is one of God's gifts, and I would hope that we would offer it back to him through our worship. The Holy Spirit can move through several separate songs as well as one continuous medley of songs."

"Churches can find that worshippers tolerate diverse musical styles when each style is presented with musical excellence," Greer said. "Think through the music regarding style and content, and let the music stand on its own."

No matter what style is used or preferred, learning new songs is essential, he added. "I'm in the middle of it, because I'm a songwriter. I'd never say it's bad to do new songs.

"But there's so much wealth in our hymnals that we're not tapping into. There's so much theology that we're missing. It's great to sing 'I Love You, Lord' and 'Lord, I Lift Your Name on High,' but it's also great to sing 'I Love Thee,' 'I Need Thee Every Hour' or 'Come, Thou Almighty King.'

"One may say, 'The language is so archaic; how can it speak to me?' I would remind them that Shakespeare and Michelangelo, as well as the psalms of David, are archaic, but they communicate as strongly today as when they were first read and seen.

"Some others say, 'Some hymns shouldn't be used in worship because they don't address God in the first person.' I would hope we haven't gotten so arrogant to presume the body of Christ never has truly worshipped until the last 20 years.

"On the other side, I've heard people say, 'Those choruses are just mindless chatter.' However, there is something to be said for meditating on Scripture, and what better way than through music?"

Greer urges church members to affirm each other's tastes and preferences and to look at worship as "our" worship, a shared community experience.

"Most people can appreciate all of it," he said, "as long as they don't feel threatened and attacked because of what they personally like. Traditionalists should not refer to contemporary music as 'little ditties,' and those who prefer contemporary should not refer to hymns as 'out of touch.'"

Scripture calls Christians to sing a "new song," Greer noted.

"Any song, traditional or contemporary, written this year or 100 years ago, is a 'new' song only if God has 'renewed' a right spirit in us," he said.

"As his family, let's stop thumbing our noses and rolling our eyes at one another and learn to love each other in all our diverse splendor."

Justices hear arguments on program furnishing computers to parochial schools

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Supreme Court justices will decide by next summer if furnishing computers to religious schools is public aid that violates the separation of church and state.

Justices heard arguments in the dispute Dec. 1. At issue is a 33-year-old federal statute that provides certain instructional equipment and materials to the nation's schools -- public, private and religious.

The 5th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals struck down a Louisiana school district's implementation of the program, saying it violated the First Amendment's mandate of church-state separation. Another appeals court, however, issued a conflicting ruling by upholding a similar program in California.

Justices asked lawyers from both sides where the line should be drawn between what kind of aid to religious schools is permissible and what is not.

Arguing that the Jefferson Parish school district should get computers and other equipment, University of Utah law professor Michael McConnell told justices that such aid should be allowed as long as it is merely "supplemental" and does not fully fund an expense the school would otherwise take on.

The school also should not use federal aid to inculcate religion or create an excessive entanglement between church and state, he said.

Associate Justice David Souter asked if policing the proper use of computers and determining if aid is "supplemental" would create entanglement issues. McConnell agreed entanglement issues would be raised but called it a "simple and routine matter to determine what they are being used for."

Arguing for taxpayers who oppose the computer aid, Lee Boothby said that unlike textbooks, which can be reviewed for content, computers can easily be used to inculcate religion.

Just like desks and bricks, "computers are basic to the operation of the school," Boothby said.

Boothby said at least one of his clients raised concerns about government restrictions accompanying the aid. Chief Justice William Rehnquist replied, "Beggars can't be choosers." Rehnquist said the school does not have to accept the aid in the first place and that Boothby's Catholic client should take her concern to "the archdiocese, not the court."

McConnell later told reporters he would not be surprised if justices approved the computer-aid program unanimously. "Why on earth would you deny it?" he said, arguing that parents of students attending religious schools "pay taxes like everybody else."

"The most important thing is neutrality," McConnell said, "that the government not treat people differently, not treat them better and not treat them worse because of their religious choices."

A group of taxpayers first challenged the Jefferson Parish program in 1985. Of 46 Jefferson Parish private schools participating in the federally funded program, 41 are parochial schools.

In striking down the program, the 5th Circuit panel cited 1970s Supreme Court rulings that upheld the loan of textbooks but not equipment to parochial schools.

Arguing for the Supreme Court to review the case, McConnell said lower courts have asked for further guidance on what the 5th Circuit called "the vast, perplexing desert" of the Supreme Court's pronouncements on church-state separation.

"When lower courts candidly admit that they are confused about the law, it is time for this Court to speak," McConnell wrote.

The Clinton administration argued in favor of the computers for religious schools. Among others favoring the aid were the Christian Legal Society, National Association of Evangelicals, American Center for Law and Justice, United States Catholic Conference and various private and parochial school organizations.

Among groups who argued that such is aid unconstitutional were Americans United for Separation of Church and State, National Education Association, American Jewish Committee, American Jewish Congress, American Civil Liberties Union and the Baptist Joint Committee.

A friend-of-the-court brief written by BJC General Counsel Melissa Rogers narrowly targeted historical issues surrounding James Madison and the adoption of the First Amendment raised by attorneys who favor the aid.

Specifically, the BJC brief took issue with claims that the First Amendment's purpose was intended merely "to prevent favoritism or coercion in matters of religion."

"Madison and his fellow Virginians opposed any aid to religion, not simply 'favoritism' of certain religion(s) over others," Rogers argued. "Madison and others took this position not to harm religion, but to protect it."

At the press conference following the Supreme Court arguments, Rogers told reporters it is wrong "to force taxpayers to support religion." She also said it is "wrong and counterproductive for religion to have the support of the state -- it leads to excessive entanglement and ultimately to state control of religion."

The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission did not file briefs on either side of the case.

-30-

Henry named administrator at Baptist Joint Committee

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Wanda Henry has been named administrator at the Baptist Joint Committee, a religious-liberty agency in Washington.

She succeeds Karen McGuire, who recently joined the staff of Columbia Baptist Church in Falls Church, Va.

Henry served 1982-1997 as senior contract specialist/contracting officer for the U.S. Secret Service. Previously she served as a procurement agent for the U.S. Customs Service.

An ordained minister and seminary graduate, Henry has also served on the staffs of Riverside Baptist Church in Washington and the District of Columbia Baptist Convention.

McGuire had served as BJC administrator since March 1995.

"Karen's skills, dedication and personality have kept our operation flowing smoothly," said BJC Executive Director Brent Walker. "Columbia's gain is our loss."

"But, I'm excited about the addition of Wanda to our staff," he added. "I'm confident her educational background, commitment to ministry and her experience in both the public and private sector will allow her to hit the ground running and that she will enhance the work of the Baptist Joint Committee."

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