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Miami Baptist pastor killed in shooting spree

MIAMI (ABP) -- A Baptist pastor in Florida was among victims in a Dec. 26 shooting spree that left two dead and three seriously wounded before ending in a suicide.

Keith Blakely, 47, pastor of Central Baptist Church in Miami, died when removed from life support 15 hours after being shot in his home. His parents, who were visiting from Texas, also were shot, but their wounds were not life-threatening.

Police said 19-year-old Jonathan Erik Carter walked past an unsuspecting Blakely in the front yard of the pastor's home in the Miami suburb of Kendall, knocked on the door, went inside and opened fire.

Blakely's 19-year-old daughter, Angela, was the apparent target of the attack. She escaped out a back door unhurt. Carter then wounded her 78-year-old grandparents and shot her father, who had rushed into the house after hearing gunfire. Blakely's wife and two younger children were not at home.

According to news reports, Angela had been a friend with Carter, who was described as a troubled youth with a lengthy arrest record, when they were in high school, but they hadn't been in contact for about a year. Carter reportedly had been upset because he couldn't date her.

After leaving the Blakely home, Carter later showed up at the house of another former friend, 19-year-old Jonathan Scarboro Lott, about four miles away, and shot him to death. The suspected motive for that shooting was an incident almost two years ago when Carter and Lott were being questioned by a police officer. Carter fled, and Lott helped identify and find his friend.

Carter then drove 12 miles to the Miami-Dade County Jail and fired on two uniformed officers outside the building. Cpl. Kimberly Richardson was shot but is expected to recover.

Eight hours later, Carter shot himself in the head. His body was discovered in a bathtub at a house under construction. Police found an explosive device in his car, parked two blocks away.

News reports speculated that feelings of unrequited love, betrayal by a friend and holiday depression contributed to the rampage.

"We can only assume that his inner turmoil became too much for him to bear, and he lost all sense of reason," Carter's family and friends said in a statement.

According to a report in the Miami Herald, Keith Blakley and his wife, Theresa, had attempted to counsel with Carter when the family befriended him about three years ago. Theresa Blakely told the newspaper she has no regrets about trying to help the teen.

"I don't regret having let any soul into the fold of our family," she said. "It is our mandate from Christ to embrace every person and love them in the name of Jesus. That is what we are all about."

A church member at Central Baptist told the newspaper that her pastor would have wanted the congregation to forgive his murderer. "His primary message was to understand and accept rather than to resent and hate," said parishioner Andrea Engle.

The historic downtown church is best known for its open-door policy, members said. Blakely once served as a missionary in South Africa, and friends said the experience profoundly influenced his ministry.

Since coming to Central eight years ago, he was instrumental in starting a ministry to the homeless and led the church in starting Spanish, Creole and Portuguese language missions.

The church houses Touching Miami with Love, a social ministry of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Blakley was a graduate of the University of Texas at Arlington and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. He recently earned a doctor-of-ministry degree from Golden Gate Baptist Theological Seminary in Mill Valley, Calif.

He also was a former Baptist Student Union minister at the University of Miami.

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-- By Bob Allen

Graham says Christians shouldn't 'target' groups

By Mark Wingfield

NEW YORK (ABP) -- Targeting Muslims and Jews for conversion is not the approach Billy Graham would take to Christian evangelism, he said in a nationally televised interview Jan. 2.

Graham, appearing on Fox News Sunday, was interviewed by Tony Snow about a variety of topics, ranging from his view of the new millennium to how he has fended off temptation as a highly public figure.

Snow referenced the recent controversy between Southern Baptist Convention leaders and religious leaders in Chicago over a plan to send thousands of Southern Baptists into Chicago, some of whom will seek to convert adherents of other religions.

"Is that the sort of thing the Baptist convention should be doing?" Snow asked.

Graham responded: "I'm a Southern Baptist, and I normally defend my denomination. I'm loyal to it. I believe in them. They have some of the finest people in the world in our denomination. But I have never targeted Muslims. I have never targeted Jews. I believe that we should declare the fact that God loves you, God's willing to forgive you, God can change you, and Christ and his kingdom is open to anybody who repents and by faith receives him as Lord and Savior."

The issue of Southern Baptists seeking to convert Muslims, Jews and Hindus has made headlines around the world in recent months, sparked first by release of an SBC prayer guide for Jewish conversion during that religion's High Holy Days. A similar controversy erupted later when the SBC issued a prayer guide for the conversion of Hindus.

Also during the Fox interview, Graham said he believes Christians often are too quick to judge others they think are sinners.

"I think we should love them and welcome them and open our arms to them, and then we don't totally accept them into our fellowship as believers and as Christians until they have repented their sins and changed their way of living," Graham said. "But as far as day-to-day friendship and being together at various functions, I don't there should be any difference at all. I have many friends that don't claim to be followers of Christ."

Graham said while many regard him a saint, he doesn't see himself that way.

"I'm not a righteous man," he said. "People put me up on a pedestal that I don't belong in my personal life. And they think I'm better than I am. ... I'm not a Mother Teresa, and I feel that very much."

Graham lauded a response during a recent presidential debate, when Texas Gov. George W. Bush named Jesus Christ as his favorite political philosopher or thinker.

"From my point of view, it was a wonderful answer," Graham said. "I mean, to millions of young people especially in the United States, Jesus Christ is the greatest man ... in the history of the world. And to me, he's the greatest person in the history of mankind and the universe. We can't prove it. I can't put it in a test tube or in an astronomical formula. But by faith I believe it because the Bible teaches it."

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Charismatic Baptist pastor offers views in new book

By Ken Walker

CHATTANOOGA, Tenn. -- A Chattanooga, Tenn., pastor attempting to spearhead a resurgent charismatic movement among Southern Baptists hopes his new book will earn a wider hearing for his view that spiritual gifts are still in operation.

"Awakened By The Spirit" will likely stir controversy as well. That is nothing new for author/pastor Ron Phillips. He has seen more than 600 members leave his Central Baptist Church since 1995 over its exuberant worship, prayers for healing and speaking in tongues.

Nearly 2,000 new members have joined the congregation during that time, however. More than half were new converts to Christianity. The church was second in the Tennessee Baptist Convention in the number of baptisms during the past church year, with nearly 300, Phillips said. More than 100 have been baptized since Oct. 1.

The church has become a lightning rod in a debate about growing charismatic influence within the Southern Baptist Convention with its annual "Fresh Oil and New Wine" conference. The next, scheduled in May, will feature a variety of well-known charismatic speakers.

While several prominent leaders in the charismatic movement have Baptist backgrounds, such as Pat Robertson and James Robison, the denomination has discouraged the movement's strong emphasis on the Holy Spirit and unconventional worship practices like speaking in tongues or being "slain in the Spirit."

Charismatics are not allowed to serve as SBC missionaries, and at least one Baptist state convention has withdrawn fellowship from charismatic Baptist churches.

Despite the controversy, Phillips said he doesn't want to stir animosity with his latest writings.

"The book isn't a fist, it's an open hand," he said. "I don't want to win a fight. But I feel Southern Baptists ought to have room at the table for hundreds of churches and millions of people who have had an experience with the Holy Spirit. I don't think we should have to apologize."

A combination spiritual autobiography and biblical teaching, Phillips' book takes aim at the "cessationist" philosophy held by many opponents of the charismatic movement. Cessationists believe that tongues and miracles took place in Bible times but are not valid today. Phillips, however, contends this view took hold in the SBC only during the 20th century.

Historically, Baptists were radical reformers, he writes. By siding with those who believe spiritual gifts died with first-century apostles, Phillips argues that Southern Baptists have aligned themselves with the very traditionalists who once attacked their ancestors.

Phillips includes an account of his own "in-filling" of the Holy Spirit in a hotel room while he was at a conference in New Mexico. On the verge of resigning his pastorate, he recalls hearing an audible voice calling his name and feeling an overpowering presence of God.

That isn't the only part of his testimony that upsets traditionalists. Later in the book, his wife, Paulette, describes being "slain in the Spirit." It occurred at a church women's banquet, as a soloist from Lee University "prophesied" over her.

Asked about how his book has been received by critics, Phillips replied, "It's a bomb." Most comments, however, have come to him via indirect sources, he added. "The chapter on falling out has been a grinding issue," he said, "but, we've had churches order it by the hundreds."

While Phillips endorses charismatic practices and argues that all evangelicals should be open to them, he also believes charismatics can learn much from Southern Baptists. Charismatics need more expository Bible preaching and a renewed emphasis on missions, he said.

"A lot of them don't have a clue what evangelism is," he commented. "I can go in to a meeting considered charismatic and I'll have a harvest. To get up and tell people how to be saved and lead 'em in a prayer to receive Christ -- few (charismatics) are doing it well."

Another of Phillips' contentions that doesn't sit well with some charismatics is that speaking in tongues is not the sole evidence of "baptism" in the Holy Spirit. Phillips says the Spirit's power is intended as a tool to help Christians witness and reach others with the gospel.

"The power of the Holy Spirit is what people need," said Phillips, "not necessarily a gift as evidence of his presence in their life."

Though once chairman of the Southern Baptist Home (now North American) Mission Board and a former leader in the SBC's conservative movement, Phillips' spiritual stance now puts him at odds with many former colleagues.

Ironically, he finds the pastors of moderate churches more open to his teaching on the Holy Spirit than conservatives.

"My conservative friends look at me like they feel sorry for me; it's like I've died or something," Phillips said, chuckling. "People who are moderate may not agree, but they are more open to say, 'Yeah, you come sit here with us.'"

Although he doesn't agree with all the book's views and faults Phillips' historical approach, the dean of Samford University's Beeson Divinity School said "Awakened By The Spirit" deserves to be widely read.

"It's an important eyewitness account of what happened in an evangelical church," said Timothy George, also a senior editor for Christianity Today. "I'm not a charismatic. There's a lot in that book I disagree with and would not endorse. But I would hope for some kind of dialogue and reconciliation."

While he doesn't speak in tongues, George said he believes the gift is biblical. He also doesn't embrace the idea that spiritual gifts have ceased, saying he can't find any evidence in the Bible to support that view.

However, he advised caution when it comes to unusual phenomena, such as "falling out." Satan can perform counterfeit miracles, so any spiritual practice must be measured against Scripture and whether it leads to spreading the gospel, he said.

The dean also hopes dialogue over such beliefs can occur without rancor and division.

"I believe there ought to be room within the family of God for people to differ on these issues in love," said George. "We also need to challenge one another. I don't believe anything goes. I think there's a place and a way for Christians to admonish and challenge one another."

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