



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Wanda Lee elected seventh executive director of WMU

By Bob Allen

TALLADEGA, Ala. (ABP) -- Woman's Missionary Union national president Wanda Lee was "pretty emphatic" when she told a search committee last year she wasn't interested in the organization's top executive job.

"There was no way," she related to the WMU executive board Jan. 22.

In time, however, she said she came to believe it was God's will for her to reconsider.

"All I have ever wanted to do is be where God wanted me to be and to do what he wanted me to do," the registered nurse and former missionary said hours after her election as seventh executive director of the Southern Baptist Convention auxiliary.

Lee, 50, of Columbus, Ga., will assume the post March 1. She succeeds Dellanna O'Brien, who retired last September.

Lee was elected unanimously at a called meeting of the WMU executive board in Birmingham, Ala. That evening, she addressed the board at a regularly scheduled meeting at Shocco Springs Conference Center near Talladega, Ala.

Lee, who appointed the executive-director search committee a year ago, said she saw her role as an elected officer to act as a bridge between O'Brien and her successor.

When first asked by the committee if she wanted the job, Lee said she was flattered but, "I knew I could not do it," and she had a list of reasons why.

When it became apparent that a new leader would not be found before O'Brien's retirement date, Lee began sitting in on management meetings at the WMU's national headquarters in Birmingham.

She said it was in the midst of a painful decision last November -- when WMU announced cost-saving moves resulting in the loss of 39 jobs -- that "God began to speak to me in ways I hadn't heard before."

She said she confessed in her prayers, as she had done before, that she felt inadequate for the job. Then, she continued, it was as if God answered: "You finally got the point. I don't want you to do it. I want to do it through you."

Rather than going to the search committee, Lee waited to see if they would reapproach her. "I told God if he wanted me to do this he would have to show beyond a shadow of a doubt," she said. "He would have to reveal it to the committee, and they would have to reopen the door. Then I would know for certain it was his will and not mine."

Since she had previously told the committee "no" in strong terms, Lee said she had no reason to expect them to ask again. At a meeting of the search committee two weeks later, Lee began to conclude that God was simply asking her to be willing to take the job and not actually to do it. Suddenly, a committee member stopped the discussion, looked at Lee and said she felt compelled to ask if God had done anything to change her mind.

"It was one of those moments when I knew God was at work and I had better listen," she recalled.

"I realize God has called me to do this," she said. "I will do it to the best of my ability."

The Shocco Springs audience, which included former executive directors O'Brien and Alma Hunt, responded to Lee's election with enthusiasm.

"I have felt from the beginning that Wanda had all the characteristics necessary for this position," O'Brien said. Lee brings "a real compassion for the lost and hurting people of the world," O'Brien said, and has "a good head on her shoulders."

Joy Fenner, executive director of Texas WMU, called Lee "a courageous and visionary leader" who will build on the past.

Search-committee chairwoman Ann Coffman of Sanford, Fla., pointed out that Lee has experience as president at both the state and national levels. She was president of Georgia's WMU from 1993 to 1996. She has been a pastor's wife and a Southern Baptist missionary, who served in the Leeward Islands between 1979 and 1981. The family left the mission field because of a child's asthma.

"Wanda's vision and leadership will determine the direction of Woman's Missionary Union as it enters the new century," Coffman said.

Lee's election comes as the 112-year-old auxiliary struggles to find ways to attract younger members amid declining membership and sales of materials. The WMU receives no funding through the SBC's unified budget, the Cooperative Program, and earns most of its support through product sales.

There also are lingering effects of the SBC controversy between conservatives and moderates. The WMU refused to take sides in that fight, leading some SBC leaders to question the women's loyalty to the so-called "conservative resurgence" that came to prevail. The WMU executive board declared in 1993 that the organization would work with all Southern Baptists.

Along with its traditional role of promoting SBC missions, the auxiliary has in the last decade branched into new ministries including a job corps to help low-income women and hands-on volunteer missions opportunities. They also have expanded their publishing arm and established a WMU Foundation, which last year took in more than \$1 million.

Lee said the WMU has "many challenges for the future," but the women who started the organization in 1888 also faced challenges in order to "stir up the churches" on behalf of missions.

"I don't believe for one moment that we have completely accomplished the task [God] has called us to," she said. "As a matter of fact, I believe God is issuing that call more loudly than ever before, and he is waiting to see if we will allow him to work through us."

Born in Russellville, Ala., Lee grew up in Michigan and south Florida before returning to Russellville during her junior year in high school. She holds a nursing degree from Samford University.

Since April 1982, Lee has worked as a registered nurse at St. Francis Hospital in Columbus, Ga.

Lee's husband, Larry, is a former pastor who now is an endorsed chaplain and director of pastoral care for the Columbus Regional Health Care System.

Their children, Allison and Matthew, both live in Birmingham. Allison graduates from Cumberland Law School at Samford University in May and is engaged to be married in November. Matthew graduates from Samford University in May with a degree in biochemistry.

In accepting the position, Lee recounted the spiritual journey that she and her family had traveled and her struggle in recent weeks with the sacrifices that her election would bring for her husband and children.

But, she said: "I remembered another time in our lives when he asked us to do that very thing, and I was reminded of how God provided everything we needed during our time as missionaries. I knew he would do it again.

A new WMU national president will be elected this summer.

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-- Teresa Dickens contributed to this report.

## **Tennessee Baptists release funds to Carson-Newman**

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. (ABP) -- Tennessee Baptist leaders have released \$2.4 million they had been withholding from Carson-Newman College in a dispute over selection of the college's trustees.

The Tennessee Baptist Convention Executive Board voted unanimously Jan. 7 to release funds that were earmarked for the Jefferson City school in 1998-99, plus interest. Those monies were placed in escrow after the college's trustees voted to change the school's charter to allow them to elect their own successors.

The state convention in November passed a compromise measure, saying the escrowed funds should be released if Carson-Newman agreed to allow the convention to elect the school's trustees next year. Carson-Newman trustees agreed and said they would submit three names for each trustee vacancy to a Tennessee Baptist nominating committee.

Michael Smith, chairman of the state convention's executive committee, said the Executive Board action would "fulfill our responsibility to the convention."

Critics of the vote, however, said the Executive Board should have demanded that Carson-Newman trustees change their charter back to the way it was, returning the power to elect trustees to Tennessee Baptists.

"Unless Carson-Newman College formally returns the nomination and election of its trustees to the Tennessee Baptist Convention, the Executive Board would be in violation of its fiduciary duty if it released the funds," said Knoxville attorney Doug Dutton and pastor Jimmy Stroud in a letter mailed to members of the board prior to the meeting.

The vote affected only funds escrowed in 1998. Funds earmarked for Carson-Newman in the convention's current budget are also being held in escrow until a permanent solution to the impasse is found.

Carson-Newman is one of numerous church-affiliated colleges and universities in the last decade to alter ties with their sponsoring Baptist state convention in an effort to insulate themselves from Baptist politics.

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-- By Bob Allen and Lonnie Wilkey

## **Promise Keepers closes its eight regional offices**

DENVER (ABP) -- Promise Keepers has closed its eight regional offices in a major restructuring, according to a report by Charisma News Service. The work is being transferred to the men's movement's national office in Denver.

A Promise Keepers official said the move was designed to make Promise Keepers more effective in working with existing ministries in conference locations.

The organization has announced plans for 15 conferences this year, with first-time venues in Orlando, Fla.; Louisville, Ky.; Baton Rouge, La.; Worcester, Mass.; Albuquerque, N.M.; and Lynchburg, Va.

More than 3.5 million men have participated in stadium and arena events around the country since former college football coach Bill McCartney founded Promise Keepers in 1990.

The organization downsized in 1998, due to a major loss in income after it stopped charging registration fees for its conferences, and has continued to suffer financial setbacks, the news service reported.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Religious violence escalates in Indonesia**

JAKARTA, Indonesia (ABP) -- Religious violence between Muslims and Christians, which has killed about 2,000 people in Indonesia in the past year, has intensified in recent weeks, leading some observers to believe the nation may be on the brink of collapse.

At least 40 lives have been lost in recent days, according to news reports.

Fighting flared Sunday, Jan. 23, on the island of Haruku when a Muslim mob reportedly attacked and burned a church. Two days earlier, about 600 Christians fled the resort island of Lombok after three days of anti-Christian rioting there left five people dead.

Indonesia's two top leaders were reportedly traveling in different parts of the country Jan. 25 in an effort to restore calm. The Voice of America reported that religious violence coupled with separatist unrest threaten to break Indonesia apart.

Indonesian President Abdurrahman Wahid denied his government was in crisis and said the violence ravaging the country could be brought under control, Reuters reported Jan. 19. He blamed militant Muslims, die-hard Christians, former military officers and jobless youth for sectarian violence.

Most of the religious violence has taken place in the eastern provinces of Maluku and North Maluku, also known as the Spice Islands. Christians once held a small majority there before an influx of Muslims from other parts of Indonesia changed the religious makeup.

About 90 percent of Indonesia's 210 million people are Muslims, making it the world's most populous Islamic state.

Many of the nation's Christians are also part of Indonesia's Chinese minority, who are prominent in business and often the target of public resentment.

About 3,000 Christians reportedly sought refuge in military and police bases in Lombok as rioters ransacked churches, houses and businesses abandoned by their Christian owners, the Associated Press reported Jan. 19. The local airport was crowded with Christians trying to leave for the neighboring island of Bali, Indonesia's premier tourist spot.

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-- By ABP staff

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