



Nashville, Tennessee  
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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**Georgia Baptists tell of surviving  
the state's worst tornado in 53 years**

By Joe Westbury

CAMILLA, Ga. (ABP) -- Georgia Baptists in Mitchell and Grady counties will never forget the Valentine's Day tornado that took 18 lives and sent hundreds to area hospitals. It was a night of fear, of heroism and of testing one's faith, say survivors of Georgia's deadliest tornado in 53 years.

The homes of eight members of First Baptist Church in Camilla, Ga., were heavily damaged and 20 others were moderately damaged in the storm, which hit around midnight. The home of pastor Harris Malcom and deacon Chris Anglin, who lived in the same subdivision, were destroyed as the families huddled together in hallways and bedrooms.

Malcom said the first thing he remembers was being awakened by his wife, Phyllis, who heard the increasing wind and hail batter their frame house. The first thing 16-year-old Katie heard was her mother waking her at midnight, pulling her to the hallway and saying "hit the floor."

"It sounded like 15 freight trains, it was so loud," she said.

The family grabbed a mattress from a daybed and huddled under it as the tornado hit in full force, pulling the roof from the master bedroom, destroying the dining room and porch, and flooding the house with cold rain.

Only the small hallway sheltering the family was left structurally intact and dry.

"I bet we didn't have 15 seconds from when Phyllis woke me up until we ran to the hall together," Malcom said. "It was over in 25 seconds but seemed like an eternity. In the dark we knew we had major damage because we could hear the rainwater pouring into the rooms, but we couldn't see a thing."

"I felt fear, because I was afraid for my family, but I was at peace with God, if you can make sense out of that. You learn a lot about your prayer life when the walls and roof are coming apart all around you," he said.

Phyllis Malcom remembers the tense moments as the family sang 'Jesus Loves Me' in the hall when she thought, "This might be our time to go."

"We just hunkered down and prayed God, just keep us all safe. Take the house, it doesn't matter, just keep us safe."

As the storm passed, the family crept over debris into the living room but had trouble seeing with no electricity. That's when a flash of lightning gave Malcom an eerie peace he was not expecting.

Through a large hole in the roof, he could see the silhouette of a cross formed by twisted limbs of one of two large pine trees that had crashed into the house. The limbs -- in the shape of a cross -- were all that were left of that portion of the tree, the other limbs having been stripped away by the wind.

"Every time the lightning flashed we could see that cross. When I saw that sign I knew it was God telling me it was all going to be OK," he says.

The family was able to flee next door to a fellow church member's house, which had less damage. By morning, walking through the rubble of their home, they were surprised they survived.

"We know that the mattress didn't save us. We know that the roof in that hallway didn't save us. What ultimately saved us and protected us was the hand of God," Malcom said.

The Anglin family shared the same sentiment.

As the Malcoms were huddling in their hallway, Chris Anglin had awakened his wife, Cindy, and told her to get their daughter from her bedroom while he ran to gather their sons.

Anglin then ran the length of their home with its split bedroom design to bring the boys to where his wife and daughter were waiting. As the storm gained strength the trio became trapped and couldn't return.

As they listened in the darkness, the wind ripped through the center of the house, scattering its walls and contents throughout the neighborhood. Both ends of the home, where family members were hiding, were undamaged, and no one was injured.

After the tornado struck the Spence Community 20 miles south, Macedonia Baptist Church bivocational pastor David Pickering went out into the night to check on an elderly member of the church. Shortly after he arrived he met Macedonia music leader and volunteer fireman Richard Powell, who also was concerned about Willie Hurst.

Between flashes of lightning they discovered Hurst's mobile home had been destroyed and its contents scattered among the trees. As they fanned out in ever-widening circles they heard Hurst groaning in the darkness.

Eventually they found Hurst lying face down in the mud with severe injuries. He is slowly recovering from seven broken ribs and a broken jaw in a Tallahassee hospital.

Other Baptists in Grady County were not so fortunate.

In nearby Cairo, Shannon Harrell, 28, and her eight-month-old daughter, Kylie Rae, were killed in the storm. Her husband Todd, a Royal Ambassador leader at Pine Level Baptist Church, and his stepdaughter Brittany, 11, survived with minor injuries.

Jimmy Kolbie, chainsaw in hand as he cut limbs in his pastor's yard in Camilla, summed up the devastation throughout the area. As he looked around at scattered clothing and housing insulation stuck in trees and fences, he paused and said: "It's a situation where what once belonged to you now belongs to your neighbors. Everything is mixed and mingled together."

## **Vandals target church over anti-gay message**

TAMPA, Fla. (ABP) -- A Baptist church in Tampa, Fla., defaced with graffiti was apparently targeted because of a publicized conference aimed at converting homosexuals.

Someone used pink spray paint to vandalize exterior walls of Seminole Heights Baptist Church during the weekend of Feb. 13, according to the Tampa Tribune. The graffiti included the message, "Tired of being Baptist?"

That apparently satirized an advertisement that ran in the Tampa newspaper headlined, "Tired of being Gay?" The ad, along with two others, was for a Focus on the Family Conference on how to prevent young people from becoming gay.

Pastor Greg Floyd said he thinks the church was targeted because it is Baptist. The Tampa-area conference is scheduled Feb. 26 at another Baptist church, Bell Shoals Baptist Church in Brandon, Fla.

Sponsors of the conference, called "Love Won Out," earlier charged censorship when radio stations and other media outlets canceled or refused to run their commercials or ads.

"We have a constitutional right to this message, and we feel that people are at work to get our message silenced," John Paulk of Focus on the Family was quoted as saying. "What we're experiencing is nothing but pure censorship."

Some radio stations ran initial spots promoting the conference but removed them after complaints. The Tribune refused to cancel the three ads it had scheduled.

Nadine Smith, executive director of Equality Florida, a social-justice organization, said there are no circumstances to make vandalism or harassment acceptable and offered help with cleaning up the graffiti. But she maintained the conference is built on a lie -- "and that lie is that there's something wrong with being gay."

The Tampa meeting will be the sixth stop on a national tour. Previous sites include Columbus, Ohio; Seattle; Memphis, Tenn.; Wheaton, Ill., and Sacramento, Calif.

Promotional materials said the meeting's purpose is to educate public-school administrators, teachers and parents about the "homosexual agenda" and how they should respond.

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-- By ABP staff. Based on reporting by Michelle Bearden and Sean Lengell of the Tampa Tribune.

## **Former seminary president's mother dies in Arkansas**

ARKADELPHIA, Ark. (ABP) -- Agnes Coppenger of Arkadelphia, Ark., mother of former Southern Baptist seminary president Mark Coppenger, died Jan. 22. She was 79.

The Arkansas Baptist Newsmagazine described her as a leader in First Baptist Church of Arkadelphia and a strong supporter of programs of the Arkansas State Baptist Convention. Her husband, Raymond, who survives, is a retired professor at Ouachita Baptist University in Arkadelphia. Other survivors include her son, two daughters and five grandchildren.

Trustees at Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., fired Mark Coppenger last year, saying inability to control his anger had diminished his leadership. Defenders, however, including family members, claimed afterward the dismissal had more to do with political enemies on the seminary's board of trustees.

Coppenger now lives in Franklin, Tenn.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Kentucky educator named head of Baylor Christian ethics center**

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- A Kentucky college professor has been named director of Baylor University's Center for Christian Ethics.

Robert Kruschwitz, who currently chairs the philosophy department at Baptist-affiliated Georgetown College, was appointed to the post by Baylor President Robert Sloan, according to a news release. The appointment is effective June 1.

The Center for Christian Ethics was chartered in 1990. It has been related to Baylor since 1997, when it moved its main office to the campus in Waco, Texas.

The center publishes a journal, Christian Ethics Today, which is edited by Foy Valentine, a retired head of the Southern Baptist Christian Life Commission and a trustee of the Center for Christian Ethics.

Kruschwitz said he plans to add a new quarterly magazine that will address thematic issues that can be used as a resource for churches and to host conferences for laity, ministers, students and professionals.

A native of Kentucky, Kruschwitz, 46, has taught at Georgetown College since 1978. He is a Georgetown graduate and earned a doctorate at the University of Texas at Austin.

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-- By ABP staff

### **BJC's Walker calls religious liberty 'a gift from God'**

By Trennis Henderson

GEORGETOWN, Ky.--Describing religious liberty as "nothing less than a gift from God," a church-state specialist told students at Baptist-affiliated Georgetown College: "If anyone's religious liberty is denied, everyone's religious liberty is threatened. We're all in this together."

Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee on Public Affairs, shared his views Feb. 10 in a lecture on "Religious Freedom and Separation of Church and State" at the 1,100-student private school in Kentucky.

"The theological principle of soul freedom should be enjoyed by every single person on earth," he said. "This freedom benefits the atheist as much as the believer. It's for the Buddhist as much as the Baptist; for the Moonie as much as the Methodist."

Addressing such issues as school prayer, vouchers and posting the Ten Commandments, Walker emphasized that "religion must be freely exercised, neither advanced nor inhibited by government."

He said the principle of separation of church and state means "government should not try to help religion or try to hurt religion but be neutral toward religion -- to turn it loose and leave it alone."

The Baptist Joint Committee, based in Washington, D.C., has represented the First Amendment concerns of several Baptist groups for more than 60 years. The organization fell out of favor with Southern Baptist Convention leaders during the SBC's conservative shift of the past 20 years. Taking issue with the BJC's strict-separationist views on such issues as school prayer, SBC messengers defunded the organization in 1991.

Walker, who took the helm of the BJC last year, had served as the organization's general counsel since 1993. "As a minister, I know that the separation of church and state is good, not bad for religion," he said. "As an attorney, I know it's good for government too."

Fielding questions about school vouchers and related initiatives, Walker said: "Direct support to sectarian schools is wrong; vouchers are the same thing. ... We don't want government to give us a helping hand. We can do it quite nicely without Caesar's help. What government funds, government inevitably regulates."

Concerning the current debate over posting the Ten Commandments in public schools, Walker responded: "As a Baptist preacher, I would say I can think of nothing better than for every person in this city, state and country to read and observe the Ten Commandments. I can think of little worse than for the government to tell us to do it."

The truths of the Ten Commandments "are something I wish we would take more seriously as a country, as a culture, even as Christians," he added, "but it's just not the government's job to tell us to do it."

"You can teach about religion in the public schools in a responsible academic and objective way," he said. "You can teach the Ten Commandments academically. Why not do it the right way rather than passing laws to stick it up on the wall as some kind of magic talisman to ward off evil?"

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## **European Baptist scholar calls for dialogue between East and West**

By Bob Allen

PRAGUE, Czech Republic (ABP) -- Baptists in Europe remain divided between East and West but can learn from each other, said a German scholar at an international conference on theological education.

"Not only the East has to learn from the West, but also the West has to learn from the East," said Stefan Stiegler at an international conference in January.

Stiegler, of Elstal, Germany, is chairman of the European Baptist Federation's Theological Assistance Group, which sponsored the event. About 70 seminary leaders and teachers from 24 countries in Europe and the Middle East attended the Jan. 13-16 conference at the International Baptist Theological Seminary in Prague, Czech Republic.

Europe is in a process of unification, Stiegler said, but differences remain between East and West. Despite proclaiming to be "one in Christ," such "gaps" also exist in Baptist life, he said.

An obvious gap is education, Stiegler said. While many Baptists in Western Europe studied at prestigious schools, other Baptists under communism could not obtain theological education.

That doesn't mean Eastern churches lack theology, Stiegler said, describing what another scholar has labeled "survival theology." Under dictatorship, there is no chance to influence politics by preaching, so faith turned inward, urging spiritual growth amid persecution. "The task of this survival theology was to find a way of Christian life under atheistic conditions," Stiegler said. "And as we can all see: it worked very well! There are strong and growing churches now in those countries."

Stiegler said he has been deeply touched in visiting Eastern churches by their spirituality and faith. "We Western Baptists have to study this survival theology," he said.

A weakness in the Eastern European mindset, however, is that education in communist schools and universities concentrated on conformity and obedience. "Initiative was not only forbidden but dangerous," he said. "Every independent personality was threatening a dictator. It will need two or more generations to overcome this shaping in the hearts of the Eastern people."

Western Baptists were also shaped by their culture, he quickly added, suggesting a preoccupation with "money and advertisement" distorts the gospel message.

Stiegler said those two mindsets offer "an invitation for dialogue" between Baptists East and West.

Stiegler warned against "two temptations" and described "two opportunities" in that dialogue.

One temptation is for churches in the East to simply "copy theology" from the West. "It will never work, because the background and the circumstances and culture are so different," he said. "Our attempts to give theological answers to the main questions of our situation of society can only be understood against the background of our special situation. That's why we should not copy theology. We have to create our own theology under our very special circumstances," he said.

Stiegler's "second temptation" is "fast-food theology" that cuts corners by not learning biblical languages or avoiding long programs of study. "Theology must grow," he said. "It is not available like material and it cannot just be sold."

The first "opportunity," Stiegler said, is "finding your identity."

"After the fall of the Iron Curtain there was no doubt that every Baptist union in Europe needs its own seminary or Bible school or institute, because theological education is a matter of identity," he said. "That's why also the role of IBTS had to be changed."

The other side of discovering identity, however, is learning to cooperate. "Only searching identify will make you poor. Cooperation will make you rich," he said.

Stiegler suggested a meeting of students from the different Baptist schools in Europe, exchanging teachers and sharing library and accounting software, application forms and student handbooks.

Most important, he said, is that European Baptists "cooperate in theology."

"We need a dialogue in basic topics," he said. "How do we understand the Lord's Supper? What do we teach about the Holy Spirit? How do we understand sanctification, and what do we teach about justification?"

The event was the first major conference to involve representatives from more than 40 Baptist-related theological institutions, seminaries and Bible schools in the European Baptist Federation. In addition to major addresses, small-group sessions covered issues including faculty, curriculum and library development and using the Internet.

CORRECTION: In the Feb. 16 ABP story "Stockholm conference launches effort to end ethnic cleansing," please correct the eighth paragraph to read as follows:

"Some may think we're foolish to say we can solve this problem," said Derek Davis, director of Baylor University's J. M. Dawson Institute for Church-State Studies, which co-sponsored the event along with Global Strategies and the Church of Sweden.

--Also, photos from Stockholm to accompany this story are available on request from ABP.

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