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Baptist Press

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February 23, 2000

(00-15)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- SBC president urges sensitivity when witnessing to other faiths
- Executive Committee requests reports on SBC interdenominational efforts
- Increased Internet use linked to social isolation in study
- Religious coalition launches campaign against poverty
- Parents rely on God in problem pregnancy

SBC president urges sensitivity when witnessing to other faiths

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Following controversies over Southern Baptist evangelistic tactics, the denomination's president now says church leaders should be more sensitive when they approach people of other faiths.

In recent months, Southern Baptist Convention officials have defended prayer guides targeting Jews and Hindus for a Christian witness. Members of those faith groups said they were offended that the pamphlets were timed to coincide with religious holidays and by negative language used to describe their beliefs. In response to the controversies, a council of religious leaders in Chicago asked Southern Baptists to back off plans to send thousands of volunteer missionaries there next summer, fearing the evangelistic blitz might set back interfaith dialogue or even incite religious violence.

In remarks to the SBC Executive Committee Feb. 21, SBC president Paige Patterson said he learned some things from the experience.

"I have learned that the word 'target' is an irritating word," said Patterson, adding that he agrees with those who object to the term. Most Southern Baptists do not use it, he said. The term is popular in one movement that designs churches to appeal to a particular generation or demographic group, which Patterson mildly criticized as "the user-friendly church."

"It is one we can do without," he said. "We don't need to target anybody. What we need to do is to get the gospel to everyone."

Patterson said Southern Baptists should not "go around trying to be so sensitive" that they miss opportunities to witness. But, he said, "The time has come for us to be careful."

Patterson, president of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., said he also believes Southern Baptists did a poor job of communicating their rationale for boycotting the Walt Disney Co.

It was an attempt to "hold our people to a new and high standard of holiness," Patterson said. Southern Baptists once were known for their social conservatism. They didn't dance, drink or attend movies. "People used to know we stood for something," he said.

"We didn't do the Disney boycott to hurt anybody," Patterson said, but to encourage Southern Baptists to "choose the best form of entertainment and leave alone that which is unwholesome."

Patterson, who described himself as "an unwilling participant" in the controversies, still bristled at the Chicago religious leaders' suggestion that Southern Baptists coming there might unintentionally provoke hate crimes by fomenting religious differences. "I cannot begin to tell you how dangerous that statement is," Patterson said.

He urged Southern Baptists to go to Chicago and "assist the poor and disenfranchised," to "love and be gentle to all" and to "witness to every single person who will listen to us."

"We have no choice except to obey the command of our Lord," Patterson said, admonishing also, "Be aware of contemporary attempts to suppress religious liberty."

In his last formal report to the Executive Committee, Patterson, who completes his term as SBC president in June, also commented on a couple of brewing internal debates.

Despite an apparent growth in charismatic influence in Southern Baptist churches, Patterson said the denomination's institutions and agencies "are not going to follow" the "neocharismatic movement." Patterson said that was not intended to criticize anyone who holds those views or to instruct any church.

Also, in light of recent criticism of Southern Baptist involvement in a dialogue with Catholics and working jointly with non-Baptists, Patterson assured, "You can expect your agencies not to be drawn into ecumenical entanglements."

He pledged, however, that Southern Baptists would continue to work with others on common concerns such as abortion and religious liberty, even "though they don't believe like we do."

Patterson also said Southern Baptist leaders are committed to working with Baptist state conventions, despite "some difficulty in recent years" in that area. Both the national and state conventions exist to serve churches, he said. "Headquarters is still the local church. That is one of the things that makes Baptists so unique."

Patterson also said Southern Baptists "can expect your institutions and agencies to be arch advocates of the biblical guidelines for the family."

"Almost every problem we have in America, whether it is pornography, divorce, wife and child abuse -- you name it -- it relates to having violated the biblical guidelines for the family."

Patterson said Southern Baptist leaders "are more committed than ever before to putting the family issue on the front burner. We're going to be the champions for the family."

-30-

Executive Committee requests reports on SBC interdenominational efforts

By Bob Allen

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- The Southern Baptist Convention Executive Committee has asked staff and trustees of all convention-related entities to review and report on their work with non-Baptists.

The Feb. 22 Executive Committee vote represents a compromise response to a motion by a messenger at last summer's SBC annual meeting asking for a committee to study potential "ecumenical" entanglements. The vote stops short of a formal study but is stronger than a September vote that simply encouraged the entities to avoid relationships that might compromise Baptist beliefs.

Southern Baptists have traditionally stood clear of the ecumenical movement represented in organizations like the National Council of Churches, but they do work with other evangelicals on social issues and joint efforts in missions and evangelism.

Recently, however, some have asked if witnessing alongside other denominations might dilute or compromise the Baptist message.

The entities are asked to report in writing "the status and implications" of such cooperative ventures to the Executive Committee no later than Sept. 1.

In other business at a Feb. 21-22 meeting in Nashville, Tenn., the Executive Committee:

-- OK'd a request to allow the SBC Annuity Board to offer personal and institutional investment plans.

The proposal, which must be approved by convention messengers in June, would authorize the Dallas-based Annuity Board to offer personal investments to ministers and denominational workers in addition to regular retirement plans.

It also would allow the Annuity Board to work in cooperation with state Baptist foundations and the Southern Baptist Foundation to offer investment services to churches and denominational entities.

While many churches and other entities invest building funds or endowments with Baptist foundations, many others also use secular investment firms. The Annuity Board proposal aims to build on the organization's reputation as a retirement provider to encourage Baptists to invest their funds in ways that benefit Baptist causes.

While presented as a win-win arrangement for both the Annuity Board and Baptist foundations, some state foundation groups oppose the change. In cases where the Annuity Board and a state foundation are unable to cooperate, the Annuity Board reserves the right to ask the Executive Committee to adjudicate.

Steven Boyd, an Executive Committee member from Simpsonville, Ky., said the Annuity Board did not adequately consult state foundations in developing the plan and admonished that SBC entities not "hand down protocol to state conventions."

-- Authorized Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., to borrow \$3.5 million for converting Rice and Judson residence halls into conference and guest housing.

-- Amended a policy to permit Liberty University in Lynchburg, Va., to exhibit a display at the SBC annual meeting.

-- Approved a 2.7 percent increase in the Executive Committee staff salary structure.

-30-

Increased Internet use linked to social isolation in study

By Sarah Griffith

PALO ALTO, Calif. (ABP) -- The "nation's obsession with the Internet" may be causing increased social isolation among its heaviest users, according to a new study.

People who spend more than five hours a week online are cutting back on face-to-face communication with family and friends, said Norman Nie, a professor at Stanford University who conducted the study on how Internet affects society.

While many argue the Internet is creating new relationships and enhancing family communication, the Stanford study suggests the Internet may contribute to "social withdrawal" among those who use it most.

"We're moving from a world in which you know all your neighbors, see all your friends, interact with lots of different people every day, to a functional world, where interaction takes place at a distance," Nie said.

The study has generated controversy among social scientists. Howard Feinberg, a research analyst with the Statistical Assessment Service, called it a "bit of a reach" in an Associated Press article.

"[The study] is preliminary work and it doesn't tell us much," he said.

Feinberg said a survey conducted over a longer period of time would be more accurate in determining the social implications of the Internet.

The study surveyed 4,113 American adults in 2,689 homes. Respondents were given free Internet access and Web TV.

Two-thirds of those surveyed said they stay online fewer than five hours a week. Of those, 13 percent indicated they spend less time with family and 8 percent said they attend fewer social gatherings.

But the more exposure people gain to the Internet, the more hours they begin to spend on it.

Nie said this data means "the trend toward social withdrawal will only increase."

Others disagree with Nie's conclusions.

"There's a lot of professional rewards for focusing on the negative," said James Katz, a communications professor at Rutgers University, in a Washington Post article. He said his own research has indicated "more than a million new friendships have been found online that have led to face-to-face meetings."

But those who conducted the study are not producing a "doomsday scenario," said Lutz Ebring, a professor from the University of Berlin who worked with Nie.

"The fact is that there is an increase in the quantity of communication," said Ebring. "But there is a loss in the warmth of the human quality."

-30-

Religious coalition launches campaign against poverty

By Kenny Byrd and Sarah Griffith

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A broad-based group of religious leaders gathered in Washington Feb. 16 to launch a 10-year campaign to fight poverty.

The group's statement, "Covenant to Overcome Poverty," asks churches, businesses and government leaders to make the poor a priority.

The covenant was spearheaded by Call to Renewal, a national federation of churches and faith-based groups working to overcome poverty.

"In a time of record prosperity, the poor are being left behind," Jim Wallis, convener of Call to Renewal, said at a press conference on steps of the U.S. Capitol, "but the churches are bonding together."

Wallis said he senses the country "is on the edge of a movement for economic justice led in large part by people of faith."

In the past, people of faith "have been a part of the problem," Wallis acknowledged. "We have not been as clear on this issue as Jesus is."

One in every five children in America is poor, Wallis said. Among racial minorities, the figure is one in three.

"Just as some of our religious forebears decided to no longer accept slavery or segregation, we decide to no longer accept poverty and its disproportionate impact on people of color," read the covenant.

The covenant outlines six "moral imperatives" aimed at overcoming poverty:

-- Prioritize people who are poor -- both in personal, family and vocational lives and in congregational and organizational practices -- through prayer and education of time and resources.

-- Decide financial choices in ways that promote economic opportunity and justice for those in poverty.

-- Evaluate public policies and political candidates by how they impact people who are poor.

-- Challenge racism, dismantle the structures of racial injustice and white privilege still present, and seek reconciliation among all groups in our society.

-- Nurture the bonds of family and community and protect the dignity of each person.

-- Organize across barriers of race, denomination, and social boundaries in common commitment and action to overcome poverty in communities, the nation and the world.

The document represents a partnership among Catholics, mainline Protestant organizations and evangelicals.

Wallis said the launch of the campaign is the culmination of four years of work and roundtables on poverty where Call to Renewal focused on bringing people of all political persuasions to the table.

Evidence of that was the involvement of Rich Cizick, the policy analyst in the office for government affairs of the National Association of Evangelicals.

In an interview following the press event, Cizick said there has been an evolutionary shift among evangelicals on addressing the issue of poverty. He said they are moving from a salvation-only message to also caring for the poor.

Cizick said some evangelicals are asking, "Where have I been on this issue of people on the other side of the tracks?" He also challenged his friends from the Christian Coalition and others -- "those that are not here who need to be here."

Cizick acknowledged that members of his own association might still "chafe at the notion of an NAE member on the same stage with someone from the NCC." But, he said, "The cold war among religious groups over the poor is over."

Southern Baptists currently give "only a pittance" to help the poor, said Robert Parham, executive director of the Baptist Center for Ethics in Nashville, Tenn. "Money goes to personnel, buildings, educational institutions and mission causes that are unrelated to poverty," he said.

Parham commended the campaign's goal of asking congregations set aside 10 percent of their budgets as a "poverty tithe" for the poor. He said he hopes the campaign will put poor people on the agenda in middle class and affluent churches.

Covenant supporters included the National Association of Evangelicals, the National Council of Churches, U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, World Vision, Habitat for Humanity, Progressive National Baptist Convention and Christian Reformed Church.

Parents rely on God in problem pregnancy

By Marv Knox

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Joel Galey's mom and dad prayed for a miracle. God gave them two.

To watch Joel crawl, feed himself cereal and laugh at his big brothers, you'd never guess he's a redheaded, blue-eyed miracle. But the 1-year-old's health represents only half the miracles his parents, Leslie and Kevin Galey, have experienced in his young life.

Leslie was 18 weeks pregnant with their third child when she visited her obstetrician for a routine sonogram late in the summer of 1998.

"You go in anticipating everything's going to be great," noted Kevin, staff counselor and minister of community needs at Wedgwood Baptist Church in Fort Worth, Texas. "You just want to find out the sex of the baby."

That was the easy part. The sonogram showed they had a boy. But tests also showed "an anomaly on an X-ray," Kevin recalled. Leslie's doctor referred them to Harris Hospital in Fort Worth, where they met with specialists who confirmed their fears.

The baby had spina bifida. "That's where the back doesn't completely close over the spinal cord," Kevin explained. "Ninety-five percent of children with spina bifida will not be normal kids who can run and jump and play."

Worse, many spina bifida children endure hydrocephalus, or water on the brain; bowel and bladder problems; clubbed feet; and numerous other physical difficulties. Usually, afflicted children must endure numerous surgeries. And the malady consigns their parents to 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week care, often involving exacting medical procedures.

One of their doctors offered the Galeys a quick solution.

"He told Leslie: 'You're only 18 weeks along. If you'd like, we can terminate the pregnancy,'" Kevin remembered.

"That's not an option!" Leslie responded, stressing the couple's strong conviction that children -- even in the womb -- are gifts from God, no matter their physical or mental condition.

Stunned but determined to do everything possible to help their child, the Galeys turned to prayer.

"We asked God why this was happening," Kevin remembered. "But we believed God could do a miracle, to fix our baby's back or change the way we feel about and respond to it. So, we prayed for a miracle -- either heal him or change our feelings of fear."

Immediately, the Galeys also set out to help God answer their prayers.

They received a second medical opinion, which confirmed the baby's condition. They also started asking what could be done, specifically homing in on the possibility of fetal surgery.

The first reports regarding possible surgery were discouraging. A doctor told them some pre-natal surgeries had been performed on spina bifida babies, but the results were not promising.

"So, we decided that's the way it's going to be," Kevin acknowledged.

Then, they set out to help God answer their prayer for changing their own fears and feelings.

"We read everything we could find about spina bifida," Leslie said. "It's scary. It's one thing after another: Kidneys could fail. Most SB children have to have a catheter, and an infection could be fatal. Most have to have a shunt to drain fluid from the brain. And you have to be aware of all the conditions and all the possible problems all the time.

"I wasn't really bothered by the prospect of my child living his whole life in a wheelchair and the inconvenience of raising him. But I was terrified that I might do something to hurt him, that I might not be observant."

Faced with such daunting prospects, the Galeys continued to ask God to comfort and guide them. "We prayed," Kevin said. "Churches all over the country prayed for us."

The first hint of an answer came in a phone call from Leslie's mother, who had a friend who had seen an Internet article about fetal spina bifida surgery conducted at Vanderbilt University Hospital in Nashville, Tenn.

The article explained that spina bifida babies take two "hits" that harm them, Leslie reported. First is the ailment itself and the problems related to the malformation of the spine. Second is a compounding set of problems -- because the spine is exposed to amniotic fluid and to "bumping around" in the uterus, the baby's health is further jeopardized as it matures before birth. So, Vanderbilt doctors were operating on fetuses to cover the spine and reduce the risks of increased spinal damage.

"For us, this was a sign that God might want us to pursue this procedure," Kevin said.

They sent an e-mail letter to Joseph Bruner, the Vanderbilt surgeon who had performed the operations, explaining their situation. Soon, Bruner called them back. He explained why two of the first four babies who received the procedure died and that 16 others had survived. He answered all their questions. And he offered to perform the surgery Oct. 30, 1998 -- in just two weeks.

The Galeys consulted their Fort Worth doctors. One particularly expressed reservations about Leslie undergoing the surgery on the baby only to endure another surgery -- Caesarian section -- to deliver the baby.

That was not a major concern to Leslie. "As soon as I was confident I wouldn't put him at greater risk, I was ready."

They traveled to Nashville, where they spent most of a week talking to doctors, social workers and other specialists. One was an ethicist, who asked them, "Your baby is not at a life-or-death risk, so why are you willing to do this?"

"We said we felt God led us to this place," Kevin recalled. "If as parents we could improve our baby's health and prevent years of surgeries, we wanted to do it."

So, with Bruner as the lead surgeon, doctors and nurses operated on Leslie and her baby. Bruner lifted Leslie's uterus from her body. Then his team located the baby, opened the uterus, prepared him for surgery and moved the infant to line up with the hole in her uterus. Another team closed the hole in Joel's back. Finally, Bruner's team closed the uterus, returned the amniotic fluid and saline solution to the placenta, replaced the uterus and completed the surgery.

Doctors immediately felt good about her surgery. They put Leslie on a careful regimen -- designed to help her heal, prevent her from going into labor and help the baby, almost certain to be born premature, develop as fully as possible.

Their optimism was well founded. Leslie carried Joel until 1:10 a.m., Monday, December 14, 1998. He was seven weeks premature, but he weighed in at 5 1/2 pounds and looked good from the start.

"We could see immediately his spine was covered," Kevin said. "He always breathed on his own; he did well, and they took him off all monitors by the end of the week. He had good bowel and bladder control, no club feet, and his legs were strong."

Doctors were concerned about the possibility of retaining fluid in Joel's skull, so they attached a shunt, which has worked perfectly for well more than a year.

Joel crawls and sits up, although "he's still a little bit behind" in his development, his mother reported. "There are still a lot of unknowns about his future. We don't know exactly what he will do. But I'm thrilled."

As far as his mom and dad are concerned, Joel is a miracle baby. God used some of the world's finest physicians to heal their son, and he has a very good chance of living a full and healthy life.

But they also believe God answered their other prayer for a miracle -- to change their fear to confidence and transform their doubts to firm assurance.

That miracle was borne by prayer, but also by looking squarely into the face of tragedy and trusting God.

"Kevin just knew God was going to heal Joel," Leslie remembered. "He's an optimist; I'm realistic. It's not that I thought God couldn't or wouldn't heal Joel, but I just didn't know if that was what God had in mind.

"A lot of children are born with birth defects. Why should my child be healed?"

Waiting on God was difficult, she acknowledged. "The doctors said, 'There's nothing you can do.' But this (surgery) gave us something to do -- to be proactive. This was empowering."

Even then it didn't eliminate the one of the hardest questions of all time: Why do bad things happen to innocent people, like little babies?

Leslie pondered that question often, especially those weeks before she even knew surgery would be possible.

"God gave man a choice, and the world fell," she said, describing the Original Sin committed by Adam and Eve, the first humans, and committed by every person in every generation since.

The world is a fallen, imperfect place. "That's what caused Joel's defect," she asserted.

Some people told her, "God doesn't give you anything you can't handle," and she dismisses that platitude as bad theology. "That's not biblical," she said. "I couldn't handle thinking God caused my child to have a birth defect. God loves my child more than I do. God wouldn't inflict that on a child."

She takes comfort in the Apostle Paul's assurance in the book of Romans, that "the world groans and God suffers," just as people do.

"I believe God walks with us. God cries with us. God gave us a choice, which we must have to fully love God." And a broken world is the price people pay for that choice and that freedom -- and that loving relationship with God.

The Galeys have experienced the truth of that lesson twice: Not just with Joel, but also from Sept. 15, 1999, when Larry Gene Ashbrook shot his way into their church, killing seven people and injuring seven others. Kevin was one of the injured, and he's still recovering from his bullet wounds.

People have asked the Galeys if the illness of their son and the Wedgwood shooting have shaken their faith.

"Just because it gets dark at night doesn't mean you don't wait for the light," Kevin said. "I rest in the fact that the sun will come up -- everything will make sense someday."

-30-

Photo available upon request from Mark Wingfield at the Baptist Standard

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