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**Best-selling author John Grisham  
says faith influences his writing**

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Research for his best-selling book "The Chamber" changed John Grisham's opinion on the death penalty, he told a Baylor University audience the morning after Texas executed its ninth inmate this year.

Grisham made a rare public speech to a capacity crowd in Baylor's Waco Hall Feb. 25 as part of an international conference on writing and spirituality called "Art and Soul." He spoke just hours after the execution of Betty Beets.

In preparation for writing the novel, Grisham made frequent visits to death row at the Mississippi State Penitentiary. He got to know the guards, the inmates and the stories of some of the convicted killers' victims, he said.

He even let guards strap him in the death-chamber gurney to get the feel of what it's like to be there.

During one of those death-chamber visits -- a night visit not normally allowed -- just he and a lone guard stood inside the tiny, antiseptic room.

"I read somewhere that you're a Christian," the guard said.

"Yes, I am," replied Grisham, a lifelong Southern Baptist and active layman.

"Do you think Jesus would approve of what we do here?" the guard asked.

The answer Grisham gave, he said, was different than what he would have said before he started visiting death row. And it was different from what he had learned growing up in the Baptist church.

"No," Grisham said. "I don't think that's what Jesus taught."

Then the guard had another question, one Grisham said he never was asked before and never has been asked since.

"Well, then," the guard said, "who do you believe in -- Jesus or the state of Mississippi?"

Grisham told the Baylor audience he now struggles with conflicted emotions on the death penalty. On one hand, he doesn't believe killing other humans is what Jesus taught, he said. "But at the same time, with every execution there's a sense that justice has been done, and I can't escape it."

His comments drew sparse but hearty applause.

The death-row experience is just one of many ways faith influences his writing of novels and writing novels challenges his faith, Grisham said.

He probably wouldn't even be a novelist if it weren't for a concern for social justice, he explained.

Early in his career as an attorney in Mississippi, he spent many hours hanging around the local courthouse and listening to trials, he said. One day he heard the testimony of a woman who had been raped, and the tragic story of what had happened as a result of that rape was so compelling he felt he must write it down.

"I sat down late one night and wrote the first page of what would become 'A Time to Kill,'" he recalled. He never had written a book before and had no intentions of becoming a novelist.

"I wanted so desperately to capture this story," he recalled. "But I didn't know if I'd finish it."

After three years of late-night writing, he had a novel but couldn't find a publisher. He was rejected by about 15 publishers and the same number of literary agents, he said.

When he finally found an agent willing to shop the book around, it took the agent a full year to secure a publisher. The initial press run was 5,000. And Grisham bought 1,000 of those himself.

"I didn't have a lot of money, but I had more than my publisher," he quipped.

Those first volumes, which originally sold for \$18 and which Grisham hawked at small-town libraries in his quest to get rid of his 1,000 copies, now sell for \$3,000 apiece, he noted.

While waiting for "A Time to Kill" to get published, Grisham worked on writing his second book, "The Firm." After first reading the manuscript, his agent urged him to spice it up with more sex and profanity.

"I'm not going to do that," Grisham responded.

"Fine," the agent finally submitted. And then nothing happened for months. The agent, Grisham said, would not aggressively promote the book without the saucier content he thought was necessary.

Then, unknown to Grisham, someone stole a copy of the manuscript and took it to Hollywood. That changed everything.

Grisham recounted how he was called away from his duties as a Sunday-school teacher to 3-year-olds one morning. He had just returned from a grocery store where he had gone to pick up juice and crackers for the preschool department, when his wife told him he must call his agent immediately.

A bidding war had begun over the movie rights to "The Firm," even though Grisham never had submitted it to a studio and the book had not been published. Grisham authorized his agent to take the highest bid, and then he went back to church.

The worship service that day lasted forever, Grisham recalled. After a long sermon, observance of the Lord's Supper and three baby dedications, he arrived home at 12:30 and found the telephone ringing. It was his agent. The movie rights had been sold for \$600,000.

Though life forever changed from that moment forward, Grisham has maintained a somewhat normal lifestyle, volunteering as commissioner of his community's Little League and participating in mission trips to Central America.

He was careful to distinguish himself as a Christian who happens to be a writer rather than a writer of Christian literature.

Nevertheless, faith does influence his writing, although "you can't preach too much" in popular fiction, he admitted.

Another book was influenced by his experiences visiting a homeless shelter in Washington, D.C. When a woman and her three malnourished children came into the shelter one night, "I was overcome with compassion but also with guilt," he admitted.

"Jesus taught us to care for the poor. ... I felt a great sense of shame for my own meager efforts. I prayed about it and said, 'God forgive me.'

"That night, the story of 'The Street Lawyer' came together," Grisham said. Fueled by his passion to bring attention to the plight of the homeless, the book was written in 51 days.

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### **Arkansas educator named Belmont University president**

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- An Arkansas university official has been named fourth president of Belmont University, a liberal-arts school affiliated with the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

Robert Fisher, a lifelong Baptist, will lead the 2,600-student university in Nashville, Tenn., beginning April 1. Fisher has been vice president for academic affairs at Arkansas State University near Jonesboro since 1996.

He succeeds William Troutt, who left Belmont last June after 17 years to become president of Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn.

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-- By ABP staff

### **Wake Forest Divinity School names pastor to teaching post**

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- An African-American Baptist minister from Baltimore has been appointed to the faculty of the Wake Forest University Divinity School.

Brad Braxton, senior pastor of Baltimore's Douglas Memorial Community Church, will begin this fall as an assistant professor of preaching and biblical studies, according to a news release announcing the appointment. He will also recruit students and develop relations with African-American churches.

"The great tradition of the African-American pulpit provides an important resource for shaping all Christian preaching," said Bill Leonard, dean of the divinity school in Winston-Salem, N.C. "All of our students, and the entire Wake Forest community, will benefit from Braxton's appointment."

Braxton, 31, is a 1991 religious-studies graduate of the University of Virginia. He earned a master's degree from the University of Oxford in England in 1993 and a doctorate from Emory University in 1999.

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-- By ABP staff

## **Poll finds Americans conflicted on election of a woman president**

By Sarah Griffith

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Most Americans are not opposed to a woman being president but say a man is better prepared for the role, according to a new survey.

A majority of Americans (60 percent) said a woman will be president eventually and 83 percent of those said it will happen in their lifetimes, according to a Jan. 13 Roper Starch Worldwide survey.

But one-third agreed with the statement, "There are general characteristics about women that make them less qualified to serve as president," according to Roper Starch Worldwide.

"These results reveal that a woman certainly can become a viable candidate for the highest political offices but must also overcome the traditional stereotypes that have tended to block women's advancement in government and business," Holly Heline, vice president of Roper Starch, said in a press release.

The ability to lead in a crisis (94 percent) and to make difficult decisions (93 percent) ranked as the two most important characteristics needed to be president.

A majority (51 percent) said a man would be better at leading the nation in a crisis and 31 percent said a man would be better at making difficult decisions.

Less than a fourth (18 percent) said women would be more capable making difficult decisions as president.

Women were portrayed in survey results as being able to handle "more emotionally laden areas" and as having more emotional characteristics.

Trustworthiness and honesty -- third and fourth rated characteristics -- were seen by respondents as more likely in a female president by more than two to one.

Respondents said a female president was more likely than a man to be able to "to understand ordinary people" by a difference of 45 to 15 percent. Women were also seen as being more likely than men to have moral character by 40 percent vs. 16 percent for men.

The survey was conducted among 1,500 adults via telephone Nov. 19-Dec. 22, 1999. The margin of error is plus or minus three percentage points.

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## **Students value parental support in science education, survey says**

By Sarah Griffith

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- American teenagers say support from parents is more important than the latest computer in helping them learn about science, according to a new survey.

"As our children know, the latest technology is the oldest technology -- brain power plus motivation," said Professor Lester Thurow, an economist who chairs the Lemelson-MIT Program at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. "Our study shows that kids still want attention, support and guidance from parents above all else."

More than half of teens surveyed (55 percent) said encouragement from parents is a better idea than "buying computers, technology and educational equipment," according to an annual survey by the Lemelson-MIT Program.

The Lemelson-MIT Program was established in 1994 to inspire a new generation of American scientists, engineers and entrepreneurs through awards and educational programs. The findings are from a survey released Jan. 10.

"Spending quality time with your children -- which can be very difficult to do these days -- is extremely important," said Colin Twitchell, the program's "invention mentor" and director of the Lemelson Assisitive Technology Center at Hampshire College.

"Without the support, interest and encouragement that parents can give to their children to foster creativity and inventiveness, the inventive, creative nature that's inherent in kids will eventually disappear," he said.

Other responses to the survey from teenagers on advice to parents were:

- "Encourage children to do well in school" (55 percent)
- "Ensure access for kids to books/learning materials" (39 percent)
- "Help children with homework or school projects" (36 percent)
- "Buy children equipment related to science" (35 percent)
- "Take children to museums" (27 percent)
- "Get involved with programs at their kids' schools" (20 percent)

Responses to the survey from teenagers on advice to schools were:

- "Better-equipped labs and workshops" (47 percent)
- "Field trips to labs, universities and factories" (44 percent)
- "More computers in school" (43 percent)
- "More time to invent and create in class" (32 percent)
- "More science and technology teachers" (19 percent)

The survey was conducted nationwide among 503 teenagers ages 12 to 17 by telephone in December 1999 by Roper Starch Worldwide Inc.

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CORRECTION: Please replace the fourth paragraph of the Feb. 29 ABP story "CBF 'young leaders' emerge as coalition" with the following:

A CBF leader and one of the retreat's convenors, Jim Baucom, pastor of Rivermont Avenue Baptist Church in Lynchburg, Va., admitted that even he had reservations about the missionary-sending organization's future. "I am worried about investing in something that might be unrealistic -- namely, asking moderate Baptists to coalesce around anything of substance," said Baucom, who will be nominated in June as the Fellowship's moderator-elect.

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