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Falwell's church partnering with NAMB to launch "flagship" church in Chicago

By Michael Leathers and Jimmy Allen

LONG GROVE, Ill. (ABP) -- Southern Baptists are hoping to plant a mega-church in an upscale Chicago suburb starting this fall, with more-than-a-little help from Moral Majority founder Jerry Falwell.

Falwell's church, Thomas Road Baptist in Lynchburg, Va., has agreed to provide \$125,000 for each of the next two years. The North American Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention will match that amount. It's a new strategy for the Alpharetta, Ga.-based mission board, in which the agency seeks out partnerships with some of the SBC's largest churches to provide the seed money for new "regional" churches in major cities.

The 22,000-member Thomas Road Baptist Church is one of the first five Southern Baptist churches to take part in the strategy, which has an immediate goal of starting a "regional" or "flagship" SBC congregation in four U.S. cities.

The other four churches are First Baptist Church in Orlando, Fla.; First Baptist Church in Woodstock, Ga.; Prestonwood Baptist Church in Dallas; and First Baptist Church in Euless, Texas. They will sponsor new churches in Philadelphia, Las Vegas and Boston.

Another 15 mega-churches have indicated they are interested in similar partnerships.

Richard Harris, vice president of church planting for NAMB, said the sponsoring churches and NAMB each agree to fund the flagship church over a two-year period. Within five years, NAMB hopes the flagship churches will grow to the point they begin to plant other churches in their respective cities. NAMB's funding stops after two years.

"The basic thesis is that large churches know how to grow churches in cities and impact the cities," Harris said.

Sponsoring churches were asked to participate by Bob Reccord, NAMB's president and chief executive officer, during an annual meeting of mega-church pastors, said Doug Metzger, NAMB's director of strategic focus cities.

Thomas Road Church chose Chicago, Falwell said. "We have a strong television constituency in Chicago. Many, many write us wanting a good evangelistic, Bible-teaching church in the area," he said.

The Chicago-area church will be the "first serious attempt to reach the affluent area of Lake County" with the gospel, according to Bob Ryan, director of missions for Lake County Baptist Association. Previous attempts have been unsuccessful because organizers had not been able to invest sufficient resources in a ministry to the point it could overcome a common suspicion that affluent people often have about Christianity, he said.

"Many of them assume we are only coming to take something from them, when we are actually coming to give something to them -- the hope of eternal life in Jesus Christ," he said. When that barrier can be broken, "they are as hungry and open to the gospel as anyone else."

A half-million dollar investment will go a long way to break that perceptual barrier. Two full-time staff positions have already been filled, and a lay person has agreed to relocate from Virginia to take charge of the children's ministry. A search for a youth pastor is in progress.

Falwell's formerly independent church joined the SBC in 1997 and contributed \$10,000 that first year to SBC causes through the then-newly formed Southern Baptist Conservatives of Virginia. Financial support of the SBC's unified budget for the coming year at Thomas Road will be at least \$100,000, Falwell said, which will be the first time the Cooperative Program has been included in the church's budget. Prior giving has been designated gifts, he said.

"Church planting is the heartbeat of most of the Southern Baptist Convention churches I fellowship with," Falwell said. "Frankly, it's the only hope we have for our nation in the 21st century." The SBC has "gone to the brink of liberalism and returned," he said, and is now poised for exponential growth. In 25 years, Falwell predicted the number of SBC churches could grow from 40,000 to 100,000.

Falwell described the concept of NAMB's partnership with mega-churches as dynamic.

"It harnesses the awesome resources of the largest evangelistic movement in North America, if not the world," he said. The idea of a local church taking the lead in a church plant and NAMB providing the support is based in Scripture, he said.

Lake County school officials have agreed to let the church use Woodlawn Middle School. "Fifteen to 20 families are intently interested in forming the nucleus of this new work," said Kevin Garber, the new pastor who was handpicked by Falwell and approved by NAMB.

"There has just been incredible momentum behind this," Garber said. He is a member of Thomas Road Baptist Church and is scheduled to earn a doctoral degree this spring at Falwell's Liberty University. He and his wife, Christy, have a preaching and music ministry that has taken them all over the country. He has been a youth pastor and a senior pastor in Knoxville, Tenn., for four years. They plan to move to Chicago in May with their three children.

Ryan described Garber as a man whose "strong commitment to missions" and "sensitivity to people" will give him the skills to reach the people in the church's region.

Garber has been to the Chicago metro region four times on exploratory trips, where he has found pockets of "explosive growth" in the community but minimal evangelistic work. He has not met with the core group but plans to meet with them regularly once he and his family have moved to the region. He anticipates a public launch between mid-September and early October, with a direct-mail blitz before the opening.

The opportunities for the church to tell people about Jesus Christ are massive, Ryan said. About 174,000 homes are within a 10-mile radius of the new church, he said, and 84 percent of the residents have no church affiliation. Only one other Southern Baptist church falls within that circle.

Southern Baptists have a presence in each of the cities where a "flagship" church is sought. The Chicago area, for example, has four Baptist associations with more than 200 Southern Baptist churches. The largest of the four, Chicago Metro Baptist Association, is composed predominantly of African-American and ethnic churches, Metzger said. The other three are in suburban areas to the north and west.

All four associations are working together on this church plant, he said.

"It's created a marvelous partnership that never existed before," Metzger said.

The Illinois Baptist State Association is not providing monetary support, but it is offering program support for the new church and has helped leaders shape an action plan, said Don Mayberry, manager of statewide organization's church-mobilization group.

More than 200 churches in the Chicago area may seem like a lot, Metzger said. But the population of the Chicago area is 8.6 million. In contrast, Houston has a population of 4.2 million and 500 Southern Baptist churches.

Harris admitted that some existing churches might oppose the planting of a mega-church in their community, fearing it will compete with their ongoing outreach efforts.

"We're not going there to harm. We're going there to try to help," Harris said.

Most of the existing churches have never grown to any significant number of members when compared with other churches in the convention, Harris said.

Advantages of "flagship" churches are not only the financial resources, which are much larger than for a typical church start, but also the other types of support from the sponsoring church, Metzger said. The sponsors will send multiple mission teams on a continual basis for six months or a year, he said.

Some members of the sponsoring churches may move to help with the new church, Harris said. The church challenges lay people who work for national companies to relocate to the church-plant area, and some are responding, he said.

The concept of "flagship, or "regional" churches is one part of a strategic plan for reaching large cities, Metzger said. Mission trips to these cities to sponsor block parties and to canvass neighborhoods to distribute tracts or Jesus videos are also planned, he said.

"There's a lot happening," Metzger said.

Since its founding in 1956, Thomas Road Church has sent out 2,100 former members who are now senior pastors, Falwell said. About half of them serve in churches they have started, he said.

Thomas Road sponsored most of those churches without any outside support, although the church has participated in Liberty Baptist Fellowship for Church Planting, an organization Falwell founded 25 years ago for Virginia churches. None of the other organizations the church supports focus on church planting, he said, including a group of independent churches called Baptist Bible Fellowship.

In a 1998 interview about joining the SBC, Falwell noted Thomas Road's emphasis on starting new churches. "We're training one thousand pastors right now," Falwell said. "Church planting is a major priority with me and has been all of my ministry. It is with Paige Patterson (president of the SBC), and we plan to coalesce with our graduates in planting a lot of new Southern Baptist churches."

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-- Michael Leathers is editor of the Illinois Baptist. Jimmy Allen is assistant editor at the Biblical Recorder in North Carolina.

High court reinstates law banning nude dancing

By Larry Chesser

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In a decision that will make it easier for cities to ban nude dancing, the U.S. Supreme Court reinstated a municipal public-nudity statute that had been invalidated by Pennsylvania's top court.

On a 6-3 vote announced March 29, justices reversed the Pennsylvania Supreme Court's ruling that the Erie, Pa., statute violated the freedom-of-expression rights of operators of Kandyland, an establishment that featured nude erotic dancing by women.

In the high court's main opinion, Justice Sandra Day O'Connor said the dancing in question is "expressive conduct, although we think that it falls only within the outer ambit of the First Amendment's protection."

O'Connor concluded that the Erie public-nudity ban is aimed at combating crime and other negative secondary effects caused by the presence of adult entertainment establishments and not at suppressing the erotic message conveyed by nude dancing.

O'Connor wrote in an opinion joined by Chief Justice William Rehnquist and Justices Anthony Kennedy and Stephen Breyer that the ordinance's requirement that dancers wear pasties and G-strings "is a minimal restriction" that "leaves ample capacity to convey the dancer's erotic message."

Justice David Souter filed a separate opinion upholding the ban, as did Justices Antonin Scalia and Clarence Thomas.

Justices John Paul Stevens and Ruth Bader Ginsburg filed a dissenting opinion.

"Until now the 'secondary effects' of commercial enterprises featuring indecent entertainment have justified only the regulation of their location," Stevens wrote. "For the first time, the Court has now held that such effects may justify the total suppression of protected speech."

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Texas Baptists respond to tornado victims

By Dan Martin

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- Baptists quickly responded with food and counseling to victims of rush-hour tornadoes which devastated parts of Fort Worth and Tarrant County, Texas, March 28

The storm hit shortly after 6 p.m., causing the most damage in the downtown area. The same tornado, or another powerful twister, struck glancing blows at South Arlington and portions of Grand Prairie.

Five persons were killed, two in storm damage, one in a storm-related traffic accident, and two to drowning. More than 100 were injured, several seriously, and property damage was in the millions of dollars.

Officials speculated the death toll would have been much higher had the tornado hit an hour earlier, before workers in the high rise, glass-covered office buildings in the downtown area had left for home.

The storm hit several downtown buildings, including Calvary Cathedral -- which formerly was First Baptist Church of Fort Worth, founded by J. Frank Norris. More than 100 persons were in the church, including at least two in a prayer tower that was devastated by the winds. No one at the church was injured.

The storm knocked glass from numerous downtown structures, causing massive damage. Officials estimated financial losses just in the downtown area at more than \$175 million.

The storm then hit residential sections south of Interstate 20 in Arlington and Grand Prairie.

The Tarrant Baptist Association activated its disaster relief unit about midmorning March 29 at the request of the Arlington Police Department. Twenty volunteers served hot meals in a residential area hit hard by the storm.

Bobby Cox, director of church and community ministries for the Tarrant Baptist Association, said the unit fixed and prepared more than 1,000 meals Wednesday. He said the group expected to continue to serve meals until Friday, "and then we will see what is needed."

Tom Law, director of missions for the Tarrant Baptist Association, said there were no reports of Baptist churches in the area being damaged.

Two Southern Baptist Convention institutions in Fort Worth -- Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary and the broadcast division of the North American Mission Board (formerly the Radio-Television Commission) -- were also spared.

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Focus on Jesus alone, church consultants say

By Steve DeVane

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Churches that thrive in the 21st century will be centered on Jesus but flexible about most everything else, two authors and church consultants said.

Bill Easum and Tom Bandy, consultants with Easum, Bandy and Associates and the authors of "Growing Spiritual Redwoods," spoke at a March 23 seminar at Asbury United Methodist Church in Raleigh, N.C. At least 10 North Carolina Baptists, including several members of the Baptist State Convention's General Board staff, attended. The Raleigh Baptist Association was a sponsor of the event.

Both Easum and Bandy stressed that church leaders must ask themselves, "What is it about my experience with Jesus that this community cannot live without?" Easum, who led the early part of the seminar, concentrated on challenging participants' thinking. Bandy then talked about practical ways to lead change in churches.

Easum believes the world is moving into what he called the "pre-Christian" era. He said Christianity in the 21st century would look more like the first century than the 20th.

Easum said his book "Leadership on the Other Side," which is due out later this year, took five years to write.

"Every time I discovered a law of leadership, it changed," he said. "There are no more laws of leadership." Easum said there are some clues to leadership, but they are "hidden in the hearts of spiritualists and mystics who avoid our churches like the plague." "We've lost our heart and soul and all we're worried about is correct theology," he said.

Easum said that pastors who are younger than 30 and are leading growing churches share similar characteristics.

The young pastors have Jesus at the center of their mission. Jesus is the only absolute, Easum said.

"One of the keys is how to talk about that without being a bigot," he said.

The pastors are passionate. They are "rabid about Jesus Christ," Easum said.

"These pastors don't build churches," he said. "They live to transform individuals and society." The pastors are also innovative. They make mistakes and learn from them, Easum said. "When they hear, 'We've never done it that way before,' they know that's the way it's got to be done," he said. "It's like waving a red flag in front of a bull."

The pastors are focused on Jesus, but flexible about everything else, Easum said. They also use their intuition. "If it feels good, they just do it," Easum said.

Leadership is not coercing people, but instead is rather helping people to be transformed by God, he said.

Easum said the clergy should not spend their time visiting people in the hospital and taking care of church members. Instead, they should equip church members to minister to one another.

The laity should find God's calling and live out their gifts rather than run the church by making decisions, Easum said.

"Lay people are the heart of the church if they're not in committee meetings," he said. "If they're in committee meetings, they're not worth squat. No one comes to Christ in committee meetings." Easum said his own experience has taught him that God can use those whom everyone else has cast off. No one knows who will be a leader, he said.

"Almost everyone who wants badly enough can be a leader," Easum said.

Leaders should ask God to show them what he is doing, Easum said.

"Most of what God is doing today is in the Third World because of our arrogance, our pride and our sheer unwillingness to repent," he said. "We're in serious trouble.

"We're just happy if we're not declining. Do you really think God honors that?" Easum said the church has become weak "only because we've turned everything over to a few hirelings to do the ministry."

Bandy said whether a church lives or dies in the 21st century has nothing to do with its strategic plan. "It has to do with how well you help people experience the Holy," he said.

Bandy used sports terminology to describe how to "coach" change in churches.

He described the five "most potent leverage points" for change in a church, adding that they are also the most stressful.

The first leverage point is to "counterbalance the faith of the core leaders." "Gather around you 12 unbalanced people," Bandy said. "That's what Jesus did."

Change can also come from adult faith formation, which Bandy calls "the pivot point around which everything turns." Growing churches know that the youth are not the church of tomorrow, he said.

"Adults between the ages of 18 and 45 who are in a spiritually transforming walk with Jesus are the future of the church," Bandy said. "You transform the adults, they'll take care of the kids."

Bandy said that "deep inside most church members don't want to grow." They have a lack of desire for God, he said.

Most clergy also do not want church members to grow, Bandy said. If church members grow, the clergy will lose their entitlements, which will bruise their egos, he said.

The third leverage point for change is "technology-supported faith," Bandy said.

People in the 21st century will value technology like 20th century people valued location, he said.

"It's not about gadgets; it's about growth," Bandy said. "Technology is the way people grow." Church members who say their church doesn't need technology or can't afford it are wrong, he said.

"They don't want to grow," he said. "They're not prepared to experience God in a new way."

The fourth leverage point is to "demythologize worship," Bandy said.

The "myth of reasonable religion" which tries to "explain gratuitous evil and rationalize grace," causes wordy worship, he said. Instead, worship should open worshippers to "the mysteriousness of God that exceeds our efforts to define" it, Bandy said.

The myth of the controllable Holy makes worship predictable, he said. This should be shattered by making worship unpredictable.

The myth of therapeutic process makes worship an extension of pastoral care. This causes healthy people to avoid churches, Bandy said.

The myth of progressive justice makes worship passive. This results in people believing that if they do the right things then God will keep them from getting cancer, Bandy said.

Bandy said the myth of heavenly favors leads people to believe that worship is only for the insiders of the church.

Organizational change never precipitates transformation, Bandy said. "But if you leverage change and transformation, it will ultimately demand reorganization." The leverage points are stressful, Bandy said.

"The people who leave will be the people who need to control or need to be controlled," he said.

The solution to controllers is not negotiation, Bandy said.

"Lead with audacity and authenticity," he said.

The start of transformation, Bandy said, is the key question: "What is it about your experience with Jesus that this community cannot live without.

"If you don't have the answer to that question, you're helpless, but if you do have an answer to the question, nothing is impossible."

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