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**Associated
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Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

Phone: 800.340.6626
Fax: 904.262.7745
E-mail: bob@abpnews.com

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**Kentucky Baptist Homes faces
employment-discrimination suit**

By Kenny Byrd

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) -- In a dispute over the use of tax dollars for religious social ministries, two civil-liberties groups have filed a lawsuit against a children's home for employment discrimination and against the state of Kentucky for funding the facility.

The American Civil Liberties Union and Americans United for Separation of Church and State filed the suit in a federal district court April 17 on behalf of a lesbian fired by the Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children.

Michael Adams, the ACLU's lead attorney in the case, said: "If this were a church, we would have no complaint. Our concern is that this is an institution receiving large sums of tax dollars and still imposing its religious beliefs on its employees."

KBHC President Bill Smithwick said: "This is not a political issue. In this context, it is not even a religious issue, it is a child-advocacy issue."

Smithwick said the agency would "vigorously defend" its policy prohibiting people who engage in homosexual behavior from employment. The organization has roughly 20 days to respond to the complaint.

One of the plaintiffs in the case is Paul Simmons, who taught Christian ethics for 23 years at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Also joining the lawsuit are two other clergy members, a civil-rights activist and a second lesbian woman who wants to seek employment at the children's home facility. The parents of a boy who was upset at the firing of Alicia Pedreira also joined the suit under the name Jane and James Doe.

"If you're going to be a state agency, you've got to live by state rules," said Simmons, who is an Americans United trustee.

News reports have indicated that Kentucky's Cabinet for Families and Children may not renew state funding for the children's home. Smithwick said if the state ends its contract with the Baptist homes, then it "will be giving tacit approval to the homosexual lifestyle."

A spokeswoman for the children's home said this year the organization received \$15 million of its \$21 million budget from the state. The facility receives the rest of its funding through private donations, foundations and an endowment. It has received state money since the late 1970s through contracts renewed every two years. The group's funding is up for renewal in June.

The ACLU charges that in 1998 the Kentucky Baptist Homes fired family specialist Alicia Pedreira because she is a lesbian. Adams said a photograph of Pedreira and her partner taken at an HIV/AIDS walk was posted at an exhibit at the Kentucky State Fair. A co-worker from the children's home saw the photo and reported it, said Adams.

The ACLU says the home fired Pedreira and, on the same day, issued an across-the-board policy against homosexual behavior by its workers.

Vickie Grassman, director for communications at the Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children, said the agency offered Pedreira a temporary position until she could find another job. A copy of the agency's employment application says employees are expected to exhibit values in their professional and personal lifestyles that are "consistent with the Christian mission and purpose of the institution."

Grassman said that, for example, an applicant with a DUI arrest in the last five years would not be hired. Grassman said that although she cannot point to a case where a non-Christian has applied, she believes a Buddhist or someone of another faith could exhibit a Christian lifestyle and thus be eligible for employment.

In a KBHC publication, Smithwick said the organization is different from other agencies "because we believe the most dynamic event to happen in anyone's life, whether child or adult, is a personal relationship with Jesus Christ. ... [W]e want to be the agent that introduces kids and families to Him."

In a press release, he added, "Having counselors who assert homosexual behavior, is not, we believe, the best way to care for troubled and abused children."

"That's not a judgment held only by Baptists," Smithwick said. "It is a value shared by many religious people and by many people who are not religious, people who teach and counsel children professionally."

But the ACLU said that the unnamed parents were "devastated" when Pedreira was fired, "because she was the first counselor to make a difference in their son's life."

The ACLU released a letter sent to the parents by Smithwick. Responding to their concerns about the firing, Smithwick wrote "to employ a person who is openly homosexual ... does not represent the Judeo-Christian values, which are intrinsic to our mission."

An ACLU press release states that Kentucky law prohibits employment discrimination based on religion but does not address discrimination based on sexual orientation.

"Today's lawsuit opens a new front in the battle against employment discrimination," said the press release, "by charging that Alicia Pedreira, a lesbian, was fired because she did not share her employer's religious beliefs about homosexuality."

Adams said "everyone agrees" that Pedreira was a good counselor. "She was fired not because she couldn't do the job, but because of religious intolerance and discrimination."

"If Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children believes that its religion teaches it to discriminate, that's its right," he added. "But to pay for it with taxpayer money violates the separation of church and state required by the Establishment Clause."

Adams said the lawsuit charges that the children's home violated state and federal civil-rights laws and that the state violated the Establishment Clause by funding a pervasively sectarian organization. The ACLU

and Americans United is asking the children's home to reimburse the state for salary paid to Pedreira, and Pedreira is seeking damages. The ACLU had been in discussions with the home and state officials for several weeks prior to filing the lawsuit, said Adams.

Americans United Executive Director Barry Lynn said the lawsuit seeks to bar any state funding from flowing to the children's home because it uses the money to advance religion.

"Churches have every right to provide social services," Lynn said. "But they may not receive tax funding if they discriminate on religious grounds. Churches can't pass the collection plate to the taxpayers if they're promoting religion."

The civil-liberties groups expect the case to have national significance because of the push by several lawmakers and the leading presidential candidates to implement "charitable choice." It was a part of the 1996 welfare-reform package and has been proposed in numerous congressional initiatives. Charitable choice allows pervasively sectarian groups, such as churches, to receive direct government money to provide social services.

The Kentucky Baptist Homes for Children currently help about 350 children who have suffered physical and sexual abuse, neglect or suffer emotional or other problems. The agency has eight residential facilities across the state, roughly 100 foster homes and offers several counseling services, such as pregnancy, adoption and family reunification.

It was established in 1869 by a group of Baptist laymen in Louisville. The children's homes board of trustees is appointed under the bylaws of the Kentucky Baptist Convention.

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SBC membership tallies 15.8 million

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- Church membership in the Southern Baptist Convention grew by three-quarters of a percent in 1999, to a total of 15,851,756, according to annual statistics compiled by the denomination's publisher.

The gain still leaves the nation's largest Protestant faith group short of the record 15,891,514 members reported in 1997.

Last year's rare membership drop was likely caused by churches moving to multiple affiliations, affecting the way numbers were reported, said an official of LifeWay Christian Resources in Nashville, Tenn.

"With an increasing trend of churches moving away from traditional affiliation patterns toward greater variety in their affiliations, we have found greater challenges in seeing that everyone is counted and counted only once," Cliff Tharp, LifeWay's constituent information coordinator, told Baptist Press.

The total number of SBC churches grew a half percent, to 41,099. For the third year in a row, baptisms exceeded 400,000. Last year's 419,342 were up nearly 3 percent.

Churches received more than \$7.7 billion in total receipts, an increase of 4.3 percent. Mission expenditures were down in the statistical count, but those numbers did not include reports from two large states.

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-- By ABP staff

Southeastern trustees strengthen seminary's ties with convention

By Jimmy Allen

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- The legal bond between the Southern Baptist Convention and Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., grew stronger April 11.

That's when seminary trustees voted unanimously to amend bylaws in a move designed to prevent the school's trustees from ever severing ties with the SBC without the convention's approval.

The bylaws amendment states the SBC is the sole member of the corporation named SEBTS. Messengers at the SBC annual meeting in June will also have to approve the measure. Four other SBC seminaries and SBC agencies, including the International Mission Board and LifeWay Christian Resources, have already adopted similar amendments. New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary is the only SBC seminary that has failed to approve the amendment.

The request for the amendment comes from the SBC Executive Committee, which doesn't want an SBC agency or institution to follow the lead of some universities and colleges that have severed ties with state conventions. Among schools whose trustees have become self-perpetuating are Wake Forest University and Meredith College in North Carolina, the University of Richmond in Virginia, Furman in South Carolina, Stetson in Florida, Samford in Alabama and Baylor in Texas.

Paige Patterson, president of the seminary and SBC president the past two years, described the move by the colleges and universities as probably illegal and "certainly not ethical."

"(These schools have) been pirated from the people who birthed them and supported them all these years," Patterson said.

Before the vote, however, trustee Tim Lewis from Illinois questioned the bylaw change.

"I don't want to over empower the Executive Committee and handcuff the seminaries from what they need to do and the trustees want to do," Lewis said.

Patterson said he was also hesitant at first to support the Executive Committee request. One reason was a concern that the Executive Committee was dictating the seminary's trustees. A rewording of the amendment specified that each institution is to be governed by its own trustees.

Another fear, he said, involves a scenario mirror-opposite to the moves by colleges and universities.

"What if the institution stays true to God and the convention goes the other way?" Patterson asked rhetorically. "When it comes down to it, you have to trust Baptist people." If the convention changes, a severing of ties between the seminary and the SBC would be theologically right but ethically wrong, he said.

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Wake Forest University desires to keep ties with N.C. Baptists, president says

By Steve DeVane

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Wake Forest University wants to continue its relationship with North Carolina Baptists, the school's president said.

University President Thomas Hearn spoke to the executive committee of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina's General Board in a meeting April 11 on the campus at Winston-Salem. Hearn talked about

how Wake Forest and the convention had managed to remain together through previous challenges.

"We want to remain in your fellowship and hope we can find a way to continue this journey together," Hearn said.

In their annual convention last fall, North Carolina Baptists voted to start the process of severing constitutional ties to WFU.

The convention lost governing control of the school in 1986. Since then, the two entities have shared a "fraternal relationship" that is described in the state convention constitution.

Last year, some convention messengers were upset because the university did not forbid Wake Forest Baptist Church from holding a same-sex union ceremony in Wait Chapel on campus. That is where the church regularly worships.

The convention voted overwhelmingly to authorize the executive committee to begin a process to dissolve the fraternal relationship. An amendment being drafted by the committee would sever formal ties with the university but would not affect the convention's support for Baptist Hospital, the Center for Congregational Health and the Poteat Scholarships. A vote on the amendment is expected at this year's annual meeting.

The university has agreed to continue to support the state convention's historical archives, which are held on campus.

In a separate resolution last November, the state's Baptists said allowing the church to hold the service "violates not only the spirit but also the letter" of Wake Forest's fraternal relationship with the state convention.

Two months earlier, the university had asked the church to not hold the ceremony in Wait Chapel, but acknowledged that as an autonomous body, the congregation had a right to proceed. A letter to the church said "it is not the intention of the university to restrict the practice of the congregation, whatever its ultimate decision may be, or to interfere with the content of the church services."

Hearn told the executive committee that Wake Forest officials have made the church aware of the school's position opposing the ceremony. He said the university holds out some hope the church will "choose a different path."

"We have a very complicated problem," Hearn told the executive committee. "We do not own or in any way control Wake Forest Baptist Church."

Some North Carolina Baptists are also upset that Wake Forest sells alcohol in a deli on campus. In 1998, the convention passed a resolution encouraging Baptist colleges to not sell alcohol. Wake Forest officials said they started selling alcohol on campus in an effort to prevent binge drinking and drinking after driving by students.

Hearn did not address the issue of alcohol sales in his comments to the Executive Committee.

Executive Committee members asked Hearn no questions and had no immediate reaction to his comments.

Bill Leonard, dean of Wake Forest's divinity school, spoke to the executive committee about how denominations are changing. He said college students' loyalty to denominations is diminishing. The "word of choice" Baptist young people use to describe themselves is non-denominational, he said, a trend that is not limited to Baptists, but is seen among all evangelicals.

Denominations once gave young people identity, biblical content and a "center," he said.

"All three are breaking apart," Leonard said.

Recognizing that the divinity school is finishing its first year, executive committee member Rick Jordan asked Leonard about the perception that the school is preparing its students to be professors instead of church workers.

Leonard replied that when he has been asked if the school is training its students to be pastors or scholars, he says, "Yes."

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North Carolina moderates meet to reflect, ponder future

By Steve DeVane

GRAHAM, N.C. (ABP) -- About 40 moderate Baptists talked more about spiritual matters than politics at an April 10 meeting at First Baptist Church in Graham, N.C.

The meeting was scheduled "to discern what God's will is for our participation in the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina," according to a letter inviting participants.

Baptist politics were mentioned a few times during the meeting but never discussed in-depth. No potential candidates for Baptist state convention offices were mentioned.

One of the meeting's organizers, Mount Olive pastor Don Gordon, had said in an earlier interview that the gathering would be a time of spiritual reflection, not choosing of candidates.

Those in attendance talked about the history of the state's moderate movement. Once a moderate stronghold, the state convention has in recent years chosen a conservative president. A shared-leadership plan proposed last year to end the impasse failed to gain a needed two-thirds majority.

Participants broke into small groups of about six people to discuss biblical stories that related to the moderate story.

One group focused on the biblical image of the disciples between the crucifixion and the resurrection. "We feel as if we are at some point between the cross and the empty tomb," Gordon said. Others chose images of Israel's 40-year wandering in the wilderness and the disciples going fishing after Jesus' burial.

When discussing the future, several people indicated that they believe moderates need to find their passion. Some indicated a dislike for the term moderate. During one small group's discussion, someone suggested the phrase "progressive conservative."

One participant said he is convinced that North Carolina Baptists' future would not be determined by moderates.

Larry Hovis, pastor of The Memorial Baptist Church in Greenville, N.C., said moderates need to think about five areas:

-- Community: Moderates need to establish some sort of network, he said.

-- Contending/Continued involvement in the Baptist state convention: The question about whether moderates would continue to run candidates for office has not been answered, Hovis said. He said moderates who have served on the state nominating committee have told him their biggest problem is not with fundamentalists throwing their weight around but with a lack of moderate nominees.

-- Contemplation: The moderate movement in North Carolina seems to be turning more spiritual than political, he said. Moderates need to find "a spiritual way of doing what we feel is the right thing."

-- Creativity: Moderates need to think about whether they are being "called out" to begin something new, Hovis said. "Maybe we don't need to recreate the convention as we know it," he said.

-- Coordination: Moderates need leadership, Hovis said. "We can't go to the next step without a larger leadership group," he said.

Following the discussions, nine people volunteered to serve as a "discernment group" to help decide moderates' next step

One of the nine, Joy Heaton, pastor of Antioch Baptist Church in Enfield, said she noticed a "sense that it's going to be all right" at the meeting. She said one sign of a healthy church is "wholesome laughter."

"I like the laughter today," she said.

Scott Frady, pastor of Calypso Baptist Church in Calypso, said he was encouraged by the number of young people at the meeting. About half of those attending were younger than 40.

"We need to know we have a future as moderate Baptists in this country," he said. "I see the future all around me and it's very promising."

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Baptists must get beyond infighting to appeal to postmoderns, expert says

By Steve DeVane

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Baptists need to get past the debate between conservatives and moderates, according to a leading church consultant and author.

"The post-modern world has gotten beyond the polarization of liberals and conservatives -- they're in neither camp," said Tom Bandy, senior editor of Net Results magazine and vice president of Easum, Bandy and Associates. "The denomination needs to get over it."

Bandy made the comments when asked about the controversy in an interview with the North Carolina newspaper Biblical Recorder.

Baptists have been caught up in the conservative-moderate controversy since conservatives gained control of the Southern Baptist Convention in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The debate has filtered down to North Carolina's Baptist state convention, where an effort to pass a shared-leadership plan failed last year.

Bandy called the controversy "a family dispute."

"The public doesn't care," he said.

Bandy said Baptist leaders need to "recognize the significance of a bottom-up world."

"Congregations -- not denominations -- are really the leaders in transformation," he said.

Bandy said Baptists should realize that the Holy Spirit is "doing a new thing" in the world. "It will inevitably involve a degree of chaos," he said.

Rather than trying to control the chaos, however, Bandy said denominations should recognize it and trust the Holy Spirit.

"There's a future for denominations, but they need to let go and let God," he said.

Jim Royston, the state convention's executive director-treasurer, concurred. "Post-denominationalism" is not the same as the death of denominations. Instead, it is a serious call to re-define the purpose and function of denominations, he said.

"Those who continue to battle for denominational purity may win their war but will lose the war for the souls of people," Royston said in a written statement. "We must continue to focus on ministry and develop leadership networks that go beyond the controversy. The war may be over, but the controversy still exists because some people feel disenfranchised."

Cass Dale, a futurist and a consultant to the state's Baptists, said Baptist churches are well-suited to deal with rapid change.

"Baptist churches are best equipped in terms of heritage and best equipped in terms of structure to move into post-modern ministry," he said. "The question is whether they are willing."

Dale said Baptist trademarks such as local church autonomy, the priesthood of the believer and the free church heritage give Baptist churches the flexibility needed to minister in the post-modern world.

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80-year-old Baptist woman ordained to gospel ministry

By Suzy Barile

RALEIGH, N.C. (ABP) -- Anne Thomas Neil wondered whether ordination was appropriate for an 80-year old retired missionary when fellow members of Millbrook Baptist Church in Raleigh, N.C., approached her last year with the idea. In fact, never during her years of Christian service had she sought to be ordained.

But believing women should have the right to be ordained, and knowing it might encourage future women in ministry, she consented. In a March 19 service, with family and friends surrounding her, Neil received the "laying on of hands" that signifies being set apart for special service, as well as words of affirmation and celebration of her life's work.

"I thought it could be seen as exploitation of the holy service," she said of her first inclination after a number of people, including the members of the church's ordination committee, sought her out. "I didn't think it was appropriate."

But what they had in mind, they explained, was a blessing -- and with that approbation, she couldn't say no.

"I could hardly refuse a blessing," she said. "So I agreed."

Neil's pastor, Robert Albritton, said church members had "seen her ministry in our midst for a long time."

"We also looked at the other part of Baptist tradition where the church called out to those for ministry," he added. Albritton stressed that the idea behind the ordination "was not something she sought or requested."

Church members simply felt "Millbrook Church and Christ's Church have been blessed by one who was attuned at an early age to hearing and responding to the voice of God, who has taken initiative in clearing new paths for spiritual development, who has contributed profoundly to the role, impact and visibility of women in ministry, and has nurtured men and women alike to discover the depths of the spirit-filled life," the recommendation for ordination said.

And though Albritton is Neil's son-in-law, and her daughter, Becky, served on the ordination committee, the church voted unanimously to honor her with ordination to the gospel ministry.

Committee members met with Neil in early February to review "the development of her personal/spiritual growth and her sense of calling to the work of missions, ministry and education." They found, their report said, that "by word and deed, she has demonstrated a sound scriptural and theological basis for her work."

In addition to long-time mission service to Nigeria and Ghana with her husband, Lloyd, Neil is a former adjunct professor at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary. She also was a founding member and early president of both the Alliance of Baptists and Baptist Women in Ministry. And she was one of the masterminds in the creation of Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond and Baptist House of Studies at Duke Divinity School.

She is honored yearly by North Carolina's Baptist Women in Ministry when the group presents its Anne Thomas Neil award to a deserving woman in ministry. The Neils raised two daughters -- one a college professor and the other an ordained minister. Both witnessed to their mother's spiritual journey during the ordination service.

Throughout her career, Neil has participated in more than 20 ordinations for women.

But she said her own ordination evoked feelings she didn't expect -- the satisfaction of a deep longing that she had never acknowledged, even to herself.

Neil said if she were to experience the same sense of calling today as when she surrendered to missionary service more than 50 years ago, "I think I would want to be a pastor."

That realization began taking shape several years ago when, as a new member of Millbrook Baptist, Neil attended a forum to discuss the kind of person the church wanted to call as pastor.

"I was hearing those attributes and when I left that night, I said to myself, 'in some ways, I missed my calling,'" she said.

Though she has no regrets about her life as a Baptist woman in ministry, Neil always thought it odd that ordination was not an option. That was underscored in her training at the now-defunct Woman's Missionary Union Training School at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., where, as a woman, she was allowed to study for only two years. Through the years, she worked side-by-side on the mission field with men, who could be ordained, and women, who could not, she said.

At Winthrop College (now University), a fellow student who was Methodist told everybody she was going to be an ordained minister one day, Neil recalls. "I wasn't shocked," she said, "but it seemed an oddity."

Though the Southern Baptist Convention discourages women's ordination, the practice is gaining popularity in the denomination's more moderate and progressive wing.

About 1,300 women have been ordained in Southern Baptist churches, according to a 1998 estimate by sociologist Sarah Frances Anders, but most serve in a church-staff position other than senior pastor or as a chaplain or counselor. About 75 Southern Baptist pastors nationwide are women, she said.

Today's church is "in such major transition in the culture of the world and global church community," Neil said.

The changes make her realize that "sometimes it's hard for younger women today to understand the dynamics of the world we grew up in," she said, "and what was expected of women, what the church expected and allowed women to be."

Friends hearing of her ordination have asked if she plans to "take a church," she said. "I hardly think so," she chuckled. "Most people in Baptist life think about preventing something like that."

Neil believes, however, that her ordination is a step she has taken for the future of the women who will follow her into ministry in the 21st century.

"I've always been a future-oriented person," she said.

Conference examines growing 'faith health' movement in churches

By Hillary Wicai

ST. LOUIS (ABP) -- Rabbi Susan Talve wonders, only half-jokingly, if her congregation will eventually fire her because she spends so much time on health care and not enough time on congregational issues.

"I'm a city rabbi and the biggest problem in the city is our kids' health," said Talve, senior rabbi at Central Reform Congregation in St. Louis. "I don't have time for this work, but I can't not do this work," she said.

"I've spent my whole day on health-care issues. I haven't even been to the office," she lamented. Between sessions at the recent Faith and Health Conference in St. Louis, Talve was on her cell phone working on a program that addresses uninsured children.

Talve was one of about 320 religious and health-care leaders who came together to ponder the increasing role faith-based institutions play in health care and the growing influence health issues play in the daily lives of congregations.

Parish nursing, for example, is almost becoming passe. In the past 15 years it's estimated more than 1,000 churches and synagogues in the U.S. have hired nurses. Parish nurses help with in-home care and offer congregational workshops on topics such as diet, exercise or health screenings.

As conference participants introduced themselves, they were quick to add that their congregations either already had a parish nurse or were studying the prospect of parish nursing. One participant explained his congregation was in a declining area so it had teamed up with several other congregations of varying faiths to hire one parish nurse who works with several churches in his area.

The conference was the first public event of the St. Louis Faith and Health Consortium, one of six such consortia in the United States and Africa. Other cities with consortia include Atlanta, Pittsburgh, the San Francisco Bay Area, Columbia, S.C., and Cape Town, South Africa. They are the result of a project at Emory University's Rollins School of Public Health. The project's goal was to identify areas where congregations could be linked to seminaries and schools of public health and medicine.

Gary Gunderson, director of Rollins' interfaith program, believes the consortia are a sign of the times. He says they'll help churches find ways to incorporate health issues into their ministries.

"If you go into any congregation and write down what they're talking about, 98 percent of it is health related," said Gunderson, an ordained minister and member of Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga.

The Centers for Disease Control add fuel to the argument for linking faith and health. The CDC cites a strong ministerial alliance as a key factor in improving a community's health. And recent studies show a positive correlation between religious belief and individual.

Gunderson says all of this points to one thing: churches that don't address the "faith health" issue will die. "The churches that survive will be the ones perceived by members as places they go to be healthy," he said.

Many who welcome the pairing of faith and health believe the religious and scientific communities have been separated for too long. "We're sick and tired of being pulled apart," said Martin Marty of the University of Chicago.

But the idea of faith health is not just parish nursing. Leaders of the conference say frankly that they aren't sure exactly what the faith health movement will encompass. But they know it's a movement in its infancy, and that it's going to be big and will help define future church.

Jesse Williams, pastor at Washington Tabernacle Missionary Baptist Church in St. Louis, explained his understanding of faith health with an example.

African-American men are four to five times more likely than others to die from prostate cancer. "What should Washington Tabernacle's response be to this issue?" Williams asked.

The church's response ended up as a partnership with the American Cancer Society and Washington University. The team held two days of prostate screening at the church.

"Many men who won't go to the doctor may go to church," Williams said. The team screened 120 men. Williams said health professionals tell him it likely helped save the lives of 7 percent of those men.

Most medical schools now offer courses on the link between faith and healing. But with the medical system in disarray and churches that say their plates are already full, how will the faith health movement move?

It may receive its biggest push from the government as welfare reform encourages faith-based organizations to administer more and more social programs.

Gunderson said he is concerned that without a thoughtful system nurtured by organizations like the faith and health consortia, churches will simply put a religious "glove on the fist of inefficient solutions."

Gunderson believes the movement needs to progress beyond being a cluster of interesting projects like parish nursing and prostate-screening days to a coherent system. He illustrated with this example: "Science says poverty and economic disparity are the greatest health risks," he said. "That means hospitals should be leading the charge against poverty."

People at the conference attended because they know they're reinventing the roles of congregations and congregational leaders. Youth ministers are or will be held accountable for the health of the congregation's youth. That includes issues such as violence, sexual identity and substance abuse. A church secretary may now have the major responsibility for coordinating referrals.

"If you didn't already have churches, you'd have to invent them to deal with this opportunity," Gunderson said.

Parish nursing is just the first step.

"The time of challenge is here," Gunderson added. "We're being asked to come to the table."

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-- Hillary Wicai is a free-lance journalist in St. Louis.

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