



Nashville, Tennessee
**Associated
Baptist Press**

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May 17, 2000

(00-42)

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**Pastor learns first-hand
lessons from wildfires**

By John Loudat

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. (ABP) -- It's easy to feel sympathy for victims of an emergency while watching it on television, but it's nothing compared to being personally involved, says a Baptist pastor forced to flee his home by wildfires in New Mexico.

"You get a really sick feeling in your stomach," said David Sims May 11, just hours after leaving his home along with 11,000 other residents of Los Alamos, 7,000 from the nearby community of White Rock and as many as 7,000 more from surrounding areas.

Sims, pastor of First Baptist Church in Los Alamos, his wife, Marthe, and their son, Micah, had fled the Cerro Grande Fire that began sweeping through their community May 10. The blaze destroyed 191 structures and left 260 families homeless.

The National Park Service started the wildfire May 4 when a controlled burn at Bandelier National Monument accidentally spread. By May 14, it had consumed 42,000 acres and was still going strong.

Sims spoke with the Baptist New Mexican by phone Thursday morning, May 11, upon the family's arrival at the home of Francis and Pat Wilson in Albuquerque.

Wilson is the business administrator for the Baptist Convention of New Mexico. He and his wife opened their home to the Simses after the family was evacuated Wednesday afternoon from Los Alamos and at about 1 a.m. on Thursday from White Rock, where they had been staying with friends.

Finally finding a moment in which he could catch his breath, Sims said that he has a renewed awareness of the limitations of humanity.

Many of the residents of the town that gave birth to the atomic bomb place a great deal of confidence in science, Sims said.

Sims said even he remembered thinking as the blaze propelled by high winds raced toward town, "The government is not going to let this town and the national lab burn." Watching the wildfire, however, reminded him there are things that even the greatest human power cannot prevent.

"It doesn't matter how many Ph.D.s you have," the pastor said soberly.

The minister said he doesn't know what God's purpose might be in the wildfire, "but his purposes are not going to be stopped by any man."

Sims spoke with the newspaper again two days later, before moving with his family to Glorieta Conference Center so they could be with other families from the church and other evacuees.

Sims had spent much of the day before at Glorieta and in Santa Fe checking on church members. At least eight church families had lost their homes, he had discovered. He said that as far as he knew at the time, his home and all the churches in the northern New Mexico community were spared.

Los Alamos residents were not expected to return to their homes for as long as another week. Sims preached last Sunday, however, at Glorieta.

How can Baptists help? Both Sims and Chuck McCullough, pastor of White Rock Baptist Church, said they appreciate financial assistance being collected by the Baptist Convention of New Mexico. The money will be used by the churches to minister to victims in the months ahead.

Most important, though, both pastors said, are prayers for residents of the displaced communities.

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Baptist church responds early to New Mexico fire emergency

By John Loudat

LOS ALAMOS, N.M. (ABP) -- What began as the end of another "hard day at the office" for a New Mexico Baptist pastor turned out to be one of the most exhausting and traumatic weeks of his life.

White Rock Baptist Church in Los Alamos agreed only a few months back to be designated a disaster-relief center in the event of an emergency by the American Red Cross.

Only minutes after arriving home about 6:30 p.m. on Sunday, May 7, Pastor Chuck McCullough received a phone call from a Red Cross official asking him to meet at the church in 30 minutes.

As a controlled burn by the National Park Service got out of hand, portions of the Los Alamos town site near White Rock were evacuated. Evacuees began arriving at the church by 8.

And so did all the help the church would need during the next three days that its facilities were transformed into a command center and shelter.

"I never had to make one call," the astonished pastor said. The stream of volunteers from the church and community "never stopped," he said. McCullough said "hundreds" came forward to help in any way they could, including opening their homes for people, pets and even horses.

The church provided all the meals for evacuees and workers for the next three days.

"It was just an amazing thing," said McCullough, who watched volunteers work six-hour shifts to care for the 60 people who were processed into the shelter.

It was tiring, too. McCullough estimated that he slept a total of 10 hours from Sunday until Thursday and not at all on the first and last nights the shelter was in operation.

By Wednesday, things were slowing down at the church, so McCullough went home about midnight for what he hoped would be a good night's sleep.

Fifteen minutes later the phone rang. Again, it was the Red Cross, informing him the wildfire now threatened White Rock, and its population of 7,000 -- plus evacuees staying in homes and shelters -- might have to be evacuated.

McCullough returned to the church. A half-hour later the order came, and the Red Cross and evacuees packed up and left.

McCullough returned home to help his wife, Karen, and 15-year-old twin daughters, Joy and Grace, leave their home and belongings.

As his daughters fretted over what to take and leave behind, McCullough said he encouraged them by saying, "I have three treasures in this house," referring to the girls and their mother.

McCullough left the house with his family, plus a pair of jeans and three T-shirts. "I wish now I would have grabbed a few more things," he admitted three days later.

With the rest of his family in bumper-to-bumper traffic headed toward Santa Fe, McCullough and a friend, Darrik Stafford, went by the church to lock it up.

Arriving, they were greeted by two national guardsmen, who asked if they had any food. The guardsmen said they and about 50 fellow guardsmen nearby were hungry, and they asked if the entire crew could come for breakfast.

McCullough and Stafford started cooking. The troops arrived at 6 a.m. for a breakfast of French toast and left with sandwiches the pair had packed for the group for lunch.

About 4 a.m. the Emergency Operation Center from Los Alamos National Laboratory called the church, asking if they could also come pick up some food.

Later the EOC called back, telling the pastor of another 200 people still at the lab who also could use some food.

At about 8:30 a.m. Thursday, after filling a Suburban full of all the remaining food and water at the church, and long after the town had been emptied, McCullough and Stafford finally left the church.

All civilians were supposed to be evacuated, McCullough said, but "we were exactly where we were supposed to be."

After a quick shower at home, McCullough finally joined his family at about 11:30 a.m. at Glorieta Conference Center, about 45 miles away, where about 850 evacuees were staying. He said he "just broke down in sobs" when he was told there would be no charge.

McCullough said he wept "all the way through" a chapel service that evening before finally getting a good night's sleep.

He awoke Friday with a "strong need" to find out where his friends and church members were. He spent the entire day at a shelter in Santa Fe ministering to people. "Everybody had to tell you their story," he said.

That evening he preached during the chapel service back at Glorieta. Addressing the crowd as a "fellow refugee," McCullough encouraged them with Jesus' words in Matthew 6 to seek first God's Kingdom and he would provide them with everything they needed, fully aware that many of them had lost nearly all their personal possessions.

When asked what Baptists can do to help, McCullough estimated that the church and community has "a year-long job ahead of us."

While 260 now homeless families are facing "utter devastation" and experiencing overwhelming grief, he said, others are having to deal with "survivor guilt."

The community will be changed forever, the pastor said. And "those beautiful green mountains" will be gone for the rest of their lives, he lamented.

Religious leaders urge lawmakers to reject favorable China trade status

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Congress should refuse to normalize trade relations with China until the Chinese government makes substantial improvements in granting religious freedoms, according to a panel of religious leaders.

Steven McFarland, executive director of the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom, testified before lawmakers on the House International Relations Committee. The May 10 hearing was for a vote expected at the end of the month on whether to grant permanent normal trade relations to China.

Quoting from a commission report, McFarland said granting the status at this point in time "could be seen by Chinese people struggling for religious freedom as an abandonment of their cause at a moment of great difficulty."

Earlier, however, three U.S. presidents joined in a show of bipartisan support for the change. Former Presidents Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford joined President Clinton and former Secretaries of State James Baker and Henry Kissinger at a White House ceremony May 9, urging Congress to approve permanent normal trade status.

Carter said his Atlanta-based Carter Center maintains contact with leaders in struggles for human rights around the world.

"And almost every single Chinese dissident ... who has spoken on this subject has publicly advocated approval of permanent trade relations with China as one of the key factors in continuing the improvement of human rights respect in China," he said.

Congress has traditionally considered the trade status of the world's most populous nation, which is often criticized for its human rights abuses, on an annual basis.

McFarland pointed to a May 1 report issued by the commission in urging Congress not to change China's trade status.

McFarland said the nine commission members come from both political parties and a diversity of religions, and a number of them strongly support free trade. Yet the commissioners were unanimous in their report in asking that the Congress not grant PNTR to China until substantial improvements are made in respect for religious freedom.

He said that what little religious freedom Chinese people enjoyed in the past is being constricted. Protestant "house churches," the underground Catholic Church, Tibetan Buddhists, Uighur Muslims and Falun Gong practitioners are all feeling the squeeze, he said.

The State Department has opposed the international commission's recommendation, arguing that granting PNTR would give the United States more leverage for pressuring China to improve its human-rights record. President Clinton has made granting China PNTR a top priority.

Carter said it's hard to compare human rights in China today to when he was president in 1978. "There was no such thing as religious freedom," he said. "There was a total prohibition against the use or distribution of Bibles in China."

Carter, a well-known Baptist who teaches Sunday school at his home church in Plains, Ga., added, "As a Baptist, I resent the fact that religious congregations of all kinds have to register with the government."

While China has not measured up to the human-rights standards of America, Carter said, "There's no doubt in my mind that a negative vote on this issue in the Congress will be a serious setback and impediment for the further democratization, freedom and human rights in China."

Opponents of PNTR come from a variety of political persuasions, from left-leaning environmental and labor groups to anti-abortion and anti-religious persecution advocates on the right.

Richard Land, executive director of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, issued a statement opposing PNTR.

"Given the People's Republic of China's deplorable and oppressive human rights policies, particularly its practices of religious persecution, it is without pause that I oppose the granting of permanent normal trade relations to China," Land said.

"Our government and people of faith in China should expect genuine, demonstrable, and purposeful progress in the area of human rights from Chinese leaders," Land said.

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Critics pan stereotypes in upcoming video game

By Sarah Griffith

NASHVILLE, Tenn. (ABP) -- A new video computer game that lets players "undress" supermodels reaches new levels of poor taste, say critics from both industry and parent-watchdog groups.

"The player is on a mission to photograph specific styles and colors of panties worn by supermodels to satisfy three testosterone-driven aliens and keep them from blowing up the Earth," reads a press release from Simon & Schuster Interactive, publishers of the CD-ROM "Panty Raider: From Here to Immaturity."

Players use "tools" including pick-up lines, X-ray glasses, and "lures" such as mints or credit cards to achieve the goal of persuading the women to undress.

Mints are used as lures instead of food, according to the press release, because supermodels consider mints "lunch."

Critics complain about stereotyping of both men and women in the game.

National advocacy group Dads and Daughters said the game makes fun of eating disorders and uses damaging stereotypes of both boys and girls.

"Anorexia kills people," the group said in a statement. "It's no more suited for joking than cancer. And then there is the stereotype that the ideal girls are obsessed with shopping and appearance. We have daughters and we know better."

The advocacy group also calls the "hormone driven anger" behind the game's humor an offensive and dangerous stereotype for males, particularly in view of last year's attack at Columbine High School in Littleton, Colo.

Boston University professor and sexual violence expert Elaine Alpert expressed dismay over Simon and Schuster's intent in producing the game.

"I am absolutely appalled that a seemingly reputable publisher such as S&S would even think of developing such an exploitative and damaging item," Alpert said in an article in the on-line magazine Salon. "The material perpetuates several myths about behavior that are damaging and downright disgusting."

Simon & Schuster Interactive defends the game.

"It's humor," said company spokesman Peter Binazeski in an article in Daily Radar, an Internet site devoted to reviewing video games. "Some people will love it, some people will not love it."

Dads and Daughters has asked Simon & Schuster Interactive to cancel plans to release the game.

"It isn't just about this game," executive director Joe Kelly told Salon. "It's about the cumulative effect of these sorts of messages."

"We are offended when our sons are repeatedly subjected to the destructive stereotypes of boys objectifying females, placing titillation above all else, and using violence or its threat to get their way," read the release.

Some in the video game industry are offended by what "Panty Raider" infers about video game players.

"'Panty Raider' is insulting to us at Daily Radar on many, many levels, as it should be to our readers," wrote Chris Kramer for Daily Radar. "Usually, we don't write about low-grade shovelware like this, but Panty Raider seemed to push some particularly sore buttons with us."

Kramer expressed concern in his article that "Panty Raider" implies video game players are "socially retarded male misanthropes with a ninth-grade education and a total inability to meet or interact with women in reality."

He said Daily Radar knows how to take a joke and is not concerned with political correctness, but "Panty Raider" is too "heinously stupid" to be a game.

Simon & Schuster Interactive is a division of Viacom and the consumer-software publishing unit of Simon & Schuster, Inc, which describes itself as "a global leader in the field of general interest publishing, dedicated to providing the best in fiction and nonfiction for consumers of all ages."

A Baptist ethics agency in Nashville, Tenn., also weighed in on the debate.

"The subtitle 'From Here to Immaturity' is about the only appropriate part of this whole, sad affair," said Cliff Vaughn, project coordinator at the Baptist Center for Ethics.

Vaughn questioned the intent of Simon & Schuster in marketing the new CD-ROM.

"The press release states the aliens are engaged in a 'perverted quest.' If --according to their own release -- that's the case, then why actively draw kids into it?" asked Vaughn.

The computer game "Panty Raider" is due to be released May 20. It is rated for a "mature audience" [17 years and older]. The estimated price is \$19.95.

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