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**Baptist couple exchange vows
 in same-sex commitment ceremony**

By Steve DeVane

WINSTON-SALEM, N.C. (ABP) -- Wendy Scott and Susan Parker exchanged vows Sept. 9 in a same-sex ceremony at Wake Forest University's Wait Chapel.

The ceremony, the first on the campus in Winston-Salem, N.C., has drawn criticism and threatens the school's last tie with the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina.

"People find themselves uncomfortable when love and justice are lived out," said Lynn Rhoades, associate pastor at Wake Forest Baptist Church.

The church is an autonomous body that worships in the university's chapel. Scott and Parker are members of the church, and Rhoades and Wake Forest Baptist senior pastor Richard Groves were among six ministers who participated in the 30-minute ceremony. The 3 p.m. service capped a tense three years for Parker and Scott, who struggled first with their church, and then the university, over their request to be united in the 2,200-seat chapel.

A few hundred people attended the service, a mix of the conventional and the unconventional, laced with laughs and serious words about struggle and love. Like heterosexual couples saying their vows, Parker and Scott stood before friends and family and spoke words of commitment in a ceremony they, not the ministers, led.

Rhoades preached a short sermon, touching on the couple's struggle. The cultural pressure against being gay, Scott and Parker said, forced them into the closet and almost ended their relationship. They got back together, they said, with the support of Wake Forest Baptist.

"When life seemed despairing, they were surprised by a God who created a way out of no way," Rhoades said.

Groves led the congregation in reciting a community covenant.

"We bind ourselves in a community with no walls, and no signs that say, 'People like you are not welcome here,'" the covenant read, in part.

After Scott and Parker made their original request to be united in Wait Chapel, heated debates followed as their congregation wrestled with the issue of same-sex ceremonies, an issue that is splitting congregations and denominations nationwide.

Critics point out that biblical passages treat homosexual behavior as sin.

Some members of Wake Forest Baptist left the church over the issue.

When church members finally gave their ministers the freedom to conduct a same-sex ceremony, a committee drawn from the university's board of trustees asked that it not be conducted in Wait Chapel.

After outcries from students and faculty members who supported the couple, WFU President Thomas Hearn emphasized that the committee was only making a request, and university chaplain Ed Christman agreed to schedule the ceremony.

Both Hearn and Christman are members of Wake Forest Baptist.

The future of same-sex ceremonies in Wait Chapel or elsewhere on campus for non-church members remains uncertain. The university has rendered no decision on that question.

Some Baptist state convention members have said that the university should have forbidden the ceremony. When the convention meets in Winston-Salem in November, messengers will vote whether to break some of its remaining ties with the university, and the fact that the ceremony occurred is expected to have an effect on that vote -- which was called for at last year's meeting.

"It's certainly not going to help the relationship," said BSC spokesman Bill Boatwright. "Our relationship right now is fraternal. We don't give them any money except for a few scholarships. To be honest, I'm not sure what we're going to do about this."

Under the state Baptist constitution, the convention does not provide any financial assistance to WFU and has no control over appointing trustees.

Wake Forest Baptist Church has received criticism over the issue, as have Parker and Scott.

The church left the state convention and the Southern Baptist Convention last year. It maintains affiliations with the Alliance of Baptists and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, an organization that also lists Wake Forest University's Divinity School as a partner-theology entity.

CBF Coordinator Daniel Vestal has said he does not support homosexual unions.

Parker and Scott live in Winston-Salem. Parker, 42, is a second-year student at WFU's divinity school.

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-- This story was compiled from information in the Winston-Salem Journal and Baptist Press.

Jimmy Carter joins fellow Baptists on Habitat for Humanity work team

By Kristi Hodge

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Former U.S. president, worldwide goodwill ambassador and well-known Southern Baptist Jimmy Carter joined 1,600 volunteers Sept. 13 in Jacksonville, Fla., for an unprecedented 101-house building blitz by Habitat for Humanity.

Sweating under a Florida sun, the 76-year-old Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, worked alongside fellow Baptists on a framing crew for a new home for Johnnie Williams.

The Jacksonville woman will soon move into Fairway Oaks, a new development in North Jacksonville for people who otherwise could not afford to own a home. The 37-acre development, set to open at the end of September, will be Habitat's first gated community, complete with a community center, children's play area and ball park.

Terry Parker Baptist Church in Jacksonville member J.L. McClelland was among the volunteers who worked alongside the Carters during the day's first shift of builders starting at 7:45 a.m.

"It was a great honor to work side-by-side with a president of the United States," McClelland said. "It was a privilege. He's humbled himself to build homes like this for needy people."

Rounding out Carter's crew were John Collum, Jim Green and Ron Henson, all from Jacksonville's Southside Baptist Church. The congregation has been actively involved in HabiJax -- as the city's Habitat for Humanity affiliate is known -- for five years.

"It was such a great testimony for Jimmy Carter to be here," said Henson, minister of education at Southside. "Not everyone you work side-by-side with on a HabiJax project knows about Christ. But today, Jimmy Carter and other Habitat leaders told the crowd about their faith and belief in Christ."

Henson is on the HabiJax board of directors and a lead organizer in the Baptist Coalition of HabiJax, which recruits churches to participate in its building efforts.

This fall the 14-church Baptist coalition plans to build 30 homes on another site in time for dedication during the upcoming Jacksonville Billy Graham Crusade, scheduled Nov. 2-5.

The Fairway Oaks building project was made possible through a partnership between HabiJax and the Northeast Florida Builders Association.

Twenty-two builders donated their time and expertise to the effort, including project director Bill Wilson, a member of Fort Caroline Baptist Church in Jacksonville. Wilson coordinated all planning and construction for the 17-day project.

"As a Christian, I prayed to use my construction talents in a ministry," said Wilson, who owns the Wilson Construction Group. "God opened up this job, and here I am."

Wilson said the builders association is committed to eradicating substandard housing in Jacksonville, which he estimated to number 30,000 homes.

HabiJax, Habitat's most active affiliate in the United States, has built more than 500 houses since 1989.

The Carters day in Jacksonville was one stop on Habitat's weeklong Jimmy Carter Work Project 2000. During the week, the Carters were also in New York to help dedicate the 100,000th Habitat house and in Plains, Ga., to build homes in the former president's hometown, where he is still a deacon and teaches Sunday school at Marantha Baptist Church.

Fellow members of Carter's church, Millard and Linda Fuller, who founded Habitat for Humanity in 1976, also were on hand in Jacksonville to work on a house in Fairway Oaks. Other persons working for the day included Jacksonville Mayor John Delaney, former U.S. Housing Secretary Jack Kemp and Jacksonville Jaguar NFL team owners Wayne and Delores Weaver.

"I'm touched by the dedication and determination I see here," Millard Fuller said of the north Florida volunteers. He said every Habitat house "is a sermon of God's love."

"We are serious about eliminating poverty housing," he said, and also about giving people the opportunity for a better life.

Jimmy Carter described revisiting Habitat homes that were built years earlier. "I've never seen graffiti on the house, any broken windows, anyone's lawn not mowed," he said. "They take pride in their houses."

"If I had to pick out one word that would kind of summarize HabiJax or Habitat for Humanity, I would say blessing," Carter said. "It's God's blessing for you and me to come out here and stand and work in the hot

sun and to see the smiles of gratification and friendship on an equal basis from the homeowners that we will grow to love."

"The thing I share with all of you is the joy of being a Habitat volunteer," Carter told fellow workers. "There's a feeling that you're not really successful in life unless you take some of what you have and share it with others."

In comments to the Florida Times-Union, Carter gave a clear testimony of Christian faith. Asked to compare his volunteer work for Habitat with his peacemaking efforts around the world, Carter told the paper: "As you know, the Savior I worship is a Prince of Peace and it just happens that Jesus was also a carpenter. I don't think there's any difference between waging peace among nations at war or people at war on the one hand, which is very gratifying, and also giving people a decent life and letting them exhibit in their own existence basic human rights."

Homeowner Johnnie Williams said she was grateful not only to the Carters but to all the volunteers who helped her build her house.

"It's great what people can accomplish when they pull together," she said. "We are reaching out with a helping hand. I'll be back next year to help build someone else's home like these volunteers have done for me."

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-- Kristi Hodge is a news writer for the Florida Baptist Convention. Barbara Denman also contributed to this story.

Habitat founder pleads for more Baptist workers

By Barbara Denman

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Habitat for Humanity founder Millard Fuller wishes more Baptists would get involved in the Christian organization that helps people get out of substandard housing.

While both Fuller and Habitat's most famous volunteer, former President Jimmy Carter, are Baptists, most are not.

"Habitat needs the Baptists," Fuller said in an interview during a 101-home building blitz in Jacksonville, Fla. "We want a stronger Christian influence at the center of what we do."

Fuller said maintaining a religious focus in the organization is "not by accident."

He noted that "the four top people with Habitat are Baptists," referring to himself; his wife, Linda; and Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter. All are members of Maranatha Baptist Church in Plains, Ga.

While evangelistic groups like Southern Baptists that emphasize personal faith in Christ often relegate so-called social ministries like Habitat to secondary status, "People are coming to know Christ through this ministry," Fuller asserted.

Not all the 10,000 Habitat volunteers worldwide are Christians, Fuller said. Working alongside unbelievers gives born-again Christians an opportunity to share the gospel in a setting that adds instant credibility. "It's in private conversation as you hammer a nail or pick up a wall," Fuller said.

Publicity generated by volunteer activity often provides other opportunities for witnessing, Fuller said. For example, an estimated 1,600 volunteers building homes in Jacksonville heard Christian references from both Fuller and Carter as they addressed workers over a public-address system. Prayers were voiced both for

the workers and new homeowners and blessings were said at mealtime. Carter also described his faith in an interview with the local metropolitan newspaper.

"Some Baptists want to know, 'What does this have to do with evangelism?'" Fuller said.

"Jesus said first to love your God and to love your neighbors as much as yourself," he answered the question. "This is loving your neighbors. This is a practical touch of your love in the name of Jesus."

At the end of every Habitat project, homeowners receive a Bible and the home is dedicated to God. "People know that this is a Lord-built house," Fuller said.

In Jacksonville -- the most active Habitat affiliate in the United States -- an unusually strong core of 13 Baptist churches make up a coalition within "HabiJax," as the group is known locally. The Baptist contingent will be involved in starting 30 churches this fall. The homes are scheduled for dedication during the city's Billy Graham Crusade, Nov. 2-5.

"We have a strong base in Jacksonville," said Ron Henson, associate pastor of Southside Baptist Church, who leads the local Baptist coalition. However, Henson pointed out, there are more than 100 Baptist churches in the city. "So we are right at 10 percent involvement," he said. "We need more."

Henson said participation in Habitat "helps build community within the church, helps churches feel they are fulfilling their mission to minister to people in need and allows a certain number of members in church to find a ministry outlet for their talents and skills."

Another aspect of involvement is finding corporate sponsors. Grant money and tax incentives are available by the state of Florida for "C-type corporations" that build low-income housing. "We're finding Baptist laymen in our churches who are involved in C-type corporations, have vast resources and are willing to commit to the endeavor," Henson noted.

"They are doing the funding, we're doing the building. The potential is there. The only thing that is stopping us is our willingness to put this all together."

The Carters came to Jacksonville as part of the 17th annual Jimmy Carter Work Project, where they spent a week building homes for Habitat. Earlier in the week in Harlem, N.Y., they dedicated the 100,000th home built by Habitat in its 25-year history. From Jacksonville, they traveled to Plains, where they were to build and dedicate the 100,001th home.

The organization now includes 2,500 affiliates around the world in 68 countries. Linda Fuller predicted that they would complete the next 100,000 homes in five years. She added that their goal is to "completely eliminate sub-standard housing in the world."

"God has really blessed this ministry," she said. "We knew there was a great need for affordable housing, and when the Carters become involved there was an explosion of growth. It made news around the world."

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Report says entertainment industry advertising explicit material to kids

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The entertainment industry is purposely marketing adult-oriented violence in movies and video games to children, charges a Federal Trade Commission report that is sending shockwaves across Capitol Hill.

The 104-page report, released Sept. 11, was commissioned by President Bill Clinton last year.

"Individual companies in each industry routinely market to children the very products that have the industry's own parental warnings or ratings with age restrictions due to their violent content," said the executive summary of the report.

The commission found that of 44 selected movies that were rated R for violence, 80 percent were targeted to children under 17. Marketing plans for 28 of those 44 films contained explicit statements that their target audience included children younger than 17.

Similar results were found in the marketing of music recordings and electronic games.

Because of First Amendment concerns, critics are reluctant to call for an outright ban on graphic games, movies and music. Some, however, are calling for tighter controls on marketing unless the industry cleans up its own advertising methods voluntarily.

Politicians from across the spectrum responded to the report with criticism of the entertainment industry.

Lawmakers at a Sept. 13 hearing of the Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation blasted the industry for going too far in its advertising.

Sen. Orrin Hatch, R-Utah, said the entertainment industry should "stop hiding behind the shibboleth of censorship, (by) claiming any form of restraint, even self-imposed, is nothing more than a capitulation to the puritanical."

"Too often the outrageous and shocking are little more than a cover for a lack of creativity and originality," Hatch said.

The FTC report recommended that codes be established or expanded to prohibit targeted marketing to children. The report also challenged retailers to do a better job of not selling graphic material to minors and urged industries to better educate parents about ratings and labels.

At the Senate hearing, it was also suggested that parents have easier access to lyrics from musical recordings.

Sen. John McCain, R-Ariz, who chaired the hearing, said neither the committee nor report was intended as censorship. "Defending these marketing practices does not defend art or free expression," he said.

Democratic vice-presidential nominee Joseph Lieberman, D-Conn., also attended the hearing. "Vigorous self-regulation is the best solution to this problem," Lieberman said. But, he added, "If these industries fail to act, and if they market adult-rated products to kids in violation of their own standards, then we must hold them accountable."

Lieberman applauded the Walt Disney Co. for agreeing to incorporate the FTC's major recommendations into its marketing practices.

Lynn Cheney, wife of Republican vice-presidential nominee Dick Cheney, also testified before the committee. She criticized the advertising practices but also did not endorse censorship as the solution.

Officials from the entertainment industry also spoke at the hearing.

Danny Goldberg, president and CEO of Artemis Records, objected that the record industry is being asked to "categorize and label groups of words." He described that as an impossible task and unfair, since other media, like books, remain un-rated.

"I respect the fact that many parents don't want their kids to watch R-rated movies, but I prefer a deeper analysis of each movie," Goldberg said. He added that he recently recommended the R-rated film "Erin Brockovich" to his 10-year-old daughter because she is a feminist and environmentalist.

"Others may disagree" with that decision, he said, "but this country will cease to be free the day that one group of parents can tell all other parents how to raise their children."

Jack Valenti, president of the Motion Picture Association of America, agreed that it would be unsuitable to target very young children in advertising R-rated films, as reported in the FTC study. He said he plans to meet with movie-industry officials to discuss the report.

But Valenti questioned some of the report's findings. For example, the report said youth were targeted when R-rated movies were advertised on the animated television show "South Park." Valenti, however, said that 77 percent of the audience of "South Park" is 18 and older.

Valenti also said an "R" rating does not mean a movie is for adults only. "It plainly states that children are admitted to R-rated pictures if accompanied by a parent or adult guardian," he said.

President Clinton applauded the report. "Persistent exposure to violence to children at young ages desensitizes them to the impact of their own behavior and others," he said.

While Clinton admitted entertainers as a whole have made great strides forward to rate their material, they cannot "make a mockery of a system (they) say has integrity," he said. "They say these ratings systems mean something. They can't turn around and advertise to people that shouldn't see this stuff."

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EDITOR'S NOTE: The full FTC report can be found on the Internet at www.ftc.gov

Texas Baptists within rights to defund SBC, author says

By Dan Martin

DALLAS (ABP) -- Labeled "uncooperative" for considering changes in the way they fund the Southern Baptist Convention, Texas Baptist leaders have responded that mutual trust and autonomy have been essential elements in the unified giving plan that helped the SBC grow into the largest Protestant denomination in the United States.

The administrative committee of the 2.7 million-member Baptist General Convention of Texas voted Sept. 13 to recommend cutting about \$5 million from eight SBC institutions.

The changes, prompted by disagreements with the 15.8 million-member national body, would be redirected to what state leaders call "priority needs" in Texas.

Presidents of the six SBC seminaries and others that would be affected by the proposed cuts said the action would effectively destroy the Cooperative Program, a 75-year-old giving plan through which Southern Baptist churches fund the state and national conventions simultaneously. One leader said Texas Baptists do not have the right to redefine unilaterally participation in the Cooperative Program, since both state and national entities have agreed to the arrangement.

One of Southern Baptists' leading experts on the Cooperative Program, however, who wrote a popular book on the subject, disagreed.

"From the beginning, participation in the Cooperative Program has been a strictly voluntary tie between the state conventions and the SBC, a handshake kind of deal," said Cecil Ray, co-author of the 1985 book "Cooperation: The Baptist Way to a Lost World," published by the now-defunct SBC Stewardship Commission.

Ray, retired executive director of the Baptist State Convention of North Carolina, now lives in Georgetown, Texas. In the 1980s, he was national director for Planned Growth in Giving, a denominational program aimed at funding Southern Baptists' "Bold Mission Thrust" plan to preach the gospel around the world by the end of the 20th century.

"Even before the Cooperative Program was established in 1925, it was stated that the sharing of funds through a cooperative effort was for the mutual benefit of both parties and that either had a right to terminate it at any time," Ray said in an interview. "It was strictly voluntary."

Southern Baptists formally established the Cooperative Program in 1925 as a means of providing orderly and systematic support of mission work, Ray said.

Before that, during its first 80 years of history, the convention "limped along with the society style of financing," Ray said. He defined the society method as "everybody for himself."

"Every agency did its own fund-raising, resulting in an inefficient and insufficient system," Ray said.

By 1919, Ray said, Southern Baptist agencies were in "total financial disarray."

"Institution and agency leaders were trapped in an exhausting cycle of borrowing to maintain operations and then trying to pay the ever-growing debts," he explained. "Hard-pressed churches had begun to revolt under the flood of appeals for denominational needs."

Leaders responded with a 5-year fund-raising effort called the "\$75 Million Campaign." While it resulted in \$92 million in pledges, Southern Baptists collected only \$58.5 million.

Some called the effort a failure, Ray noted, but others saw success in that it demonstrated to Southern Baptists the potential of cooperation.

Leaders of the day were concerned that the autonomy of every echelon of Baptist life be protected, added Leon McBeth, professor of church history at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. To address that concern, leaders adopted a statement in 1928 spelling out the relationship between Baptist churches, state conventions and the SBC.

"That statement says that all Baptist bodies are independent and autonomous but that the state conventions and the SBC agree to work together for common goals," he explained.

The 1928 SBC Annual records that messengers adopted a "statement of principles" concerning the relationship of the SBC to other Baptist bodies.

It affirmed the Baptist principle that each "church is a free and voluntary association of believers ... and it follows that each church is autonomous or self-determining in all matters pertaining to its own life and activities."

Local churches, it continued, are "not subject to any other church or organization of any kind whatsoever, but only to Christ and his authority."

History, McBeth said, supports the notion that the relationships between state conventions and the SBC are strictly voluntary "cooperative arrangements which can be changed at any time by either body."

"Not just the states; the SBC (also) can change the arrangement if they want to," he said.

McBeth said that one state convention in the early 1930s attempted to withhold money from the SBC. "But it was established that when a state convention adopted a budget, it was a contract, and they could not arbitrarily withhold funds they had collected, because those funds had been given by the churches with the understanding that it would be used in certain ways."

However, McBeth added, that is a year-to-year agreement.

"Texas does not have the right to change the budget in the middle of the year, but they can in any new year. They have the right to indicate they are no longer content with the arrangement and want to change it. Either side can do that."

McBeth and Ray agreed that the Cooperative Program is based on trust between Baptist bodies of equal stature and standing.

"When the trust breaks down, then the Cooperative Program breaks down," McBeth said.

Ray said that for the three-quarters of a century since it was founded, the Cooperative Program has been an informal agreement between the state conventions and the national body that has worked well.

Still, there are few historical documents that spell out how the giving plan is supposed to work, Ray added.

Most of the state conventions have traditionally adopted budgets that divide the total Cooperative Program gifts between the state conventions and the national body on a percentage basis.

For instance, in 1999, Texas received total Cooperative Program gifts of \$73 million. It retained 64 percent (\$47 million) while sending 36 percent (\$26 million) to support worldwide Baptist causes, including the SBC.

While the original proposal called for a 50-50 split between state and national conventions, few states have found that division feasible.

"State conventions have always had the right to adjust the percentages, depending on the needs in the state and the economic times," said Alan Lefever, president of the Texas Baptist Historical Society.

Ray, who at one time headed the Texas Baptist stewardship department, said an organizing principle always has been that the Cooperative Program "is strictly voluntary and can be changed by either party at any time without the other's consent.

"It was so harmonious for 70 years that we tended to forget that voluntary aspect of it," he said. "I can understand why the SBC leaders are reacting like they are. It is their lifeline, but the principle has always been that it is strictly voluntary.

"In places where the state conventions are in accord with the direction of the SBC, this is not an issue. But in states like ours, and others which are not pleased with what the SBC leadership is doing, this kind of adjusting will have to take place."

"After so many years of harmony, no one exercised their right to change the agreement. But now," he said, the times have changed.

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