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**Religion reporters seek to balance
sensitivity with journalist standards**

By Laurie Lattimore

MACON, Ga. (ABP) -- Jim and Tammy Faye Bakker's fall from grace in 1987 moved religion reporting from the church page to the front page. Coverage by the Charlotte Observer exposing a multimillion-dollar fraud launched a wave of investigative reports of scandals involving televangelists.

While much faith-related news remains relegated to inside pages once a week, religion reporting has grown more sophisticated in the last 13 years. Journalists that cover religion acknowledge it can be a tricky beat.

Religious views are held deeply, and adherents can take it personally when their faith becomes the focus of controversy. Journalists say they try to be sensitive to readers' feelings but must also use the same professional standards as with any other story.

"We try to follow all the same rules, guidelines, standards that you would follow for covering any kind of story," said David Anderson, editor of Religion News Service. "In some ways covering religion is no different, you just come at the story from a slightly different perspective."

Anderson, a veteran journalist, said in addition to being accurate, religion reporting must be fair to all sides in a story and complete in the coverage.

"Fairness is going beyond the perception that news is just two points of view," Anderson said. "We are learning as we cover ethical issues that they are very complex, and religion is a particularly sensitive issue for people, so a particular kind of sensitivity is required."

David Waters, religion editor for The Commercial Appeal in Memphis, Tenn., said being sensitive doesn't mean avoiding the truth. And finding the truth often means digging deeper than the surface.

"More important than getting the facts is getting the truth," Waters said. "And that is especially true for religion. Look at the Bible. These guys had amazing problems, and the Bible is amazingly truthful. So we should not be afraid of the truth."

Secular publications, with diverse audiences used to varying viewpoints and controversy, find that easier than the religious press. While sharing the responsibility to print the truth, denominational papers have a harder time navigating divisive issues without alienating an internal audience.

In the spring of 1997, the Alabama Baptist-funded University of Mobile found itself practically bankrupt, with a debt exceeding \$10 million. That led to the forced resignation of President Michael Magnoli amid charges of fiscal irregularities.

Though problems had been hinted for two years and insiders knew trouble was on the horizon, Alabama Baptists learned of the scandal not in their Baptist newspaper but had to wait for The Mobile Register to break the bad news.

Alabama Baptist Editor Bob Terry makes no apologies for that approach. Working for a publication that is partially funded by the state Baptist convention and governed by a convention-elected board of directors, Terry understands the dilemma of reporting the news without tearing down the organization.

Given the political mood in Alabama Baptist life at the time, Terry feared investigative coverage of Mobile would make the paper appear to be taking sides between factions. Terry said it wasn't his paper's job to break the story but to cover it accurately and honestly once it went public.

"I don't have to write the lead that is hard-hitting and award-winning if it will jeopardize our opportunity to continue our ministry," Terry said. "I don't have to hit people over the head with a baseball bat just because I can. I have to handle information with respect for the relationship, the cooperative nature of Baptists and the Bible's teaching of handling situations with love."

Trennis Henderson, editor of the Western Recorder, the state Baptist newspaper based in Louisville, Ky., always reminds people that as a Christian journalist, both words in the title are important. "As a journalist, I must be accurate, balanced and objective," he said. "As a Christian, I am also seeking to temper that with sensitivity and compassion."

But others warn that emphasizing sensitivity and compassion can invite trouble where journalistic integrity is concerned. Jeanean Merkel, president of the Religion Communicators Council, a professional organization with members from across the religious spectrum, says religious publications must uphold the industry's standards because readers will detect and reject shoddy journalism.

"Most audiences are sophisticated media consumers, so to succeed the newspapers and magazines need to follow journalistic principles in order to be credible," Merkel said. As director of communications for the national leadership conferences for Catholic religious orders, Merkel has witnessed the increasing professionalism of Catholic news.

"The days of a diocese newspaper being the voice of the bishop are gone because people don't want that," Merkel said. "The audience is demanding higher standards."

But Marv Knox, editor of the Baptist Standard in Texas, says too many readers view truthful information not as good journalism but as an attempt to stir up controversy. "We have a commitment to trust people with information, even if it is unpleasant," he said.

"People say they want a publication to be fair, but what they want is to have an advocate," Knox added. "The standard for fair is, 'Is it told my way?'"

Greg Warner, executive editor of Associated Baptist Press, says the best religious reporting should include the best general reporting standards without losing sight of a higher calling to support faith. Trying to skirt controversy on doctrinal issues or sensitive topics, Warner says, ignores a Christian responsibility to accuracy in reporting.

Warner says the power struggles in the Southern Baptist Convention in the 1980s ultimately made Baptist reporters and editors better journalists. But it also created a large constituency unhappy with news critical of the denomination and its leaders.

"The pendulum swing is going back to weaker Baptist journalism to the point that some define Christian journalism as subjective, which I totally disagree with," Warner said. "There are fewer true, objective Baptist reporters."

Knox notices a similar trend and is fearful of the future. Pressure from state-convention executives or trustees to force Baptist editors to promote only certain positions threatens the journalistic integrity of Baptist journalism generally, Knox contends. And that, he says, ultimately hurts all Baptists.

"Every sphere in Baptist life functions democratically, trusting people to make their own decisions," Knox said. "If Baptists are lied to, they may be happier in the short run, but in the long run they will not be informed."

Observers cite recent actions by Baptist Press as evidence of what can happen when promotion becomes a priority. Critics say the news service abandoned basic journalistic principles in issuing stories aimed at swaying public opinion against the Baptist General Convention of Texas and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship.

Will Hall, the SBC Executive Committee's new vice president for convention news, declined to be interviewed for this article about the role of Baptist Press. When asked by Baptist editors last winter what qualifications would be sought in a new leader for Baptist Press, SBC Chief Executive Officer Morris Chapman responded that his first priority was finding "someone who is loyal to me and the conservative cause."

As the official news service of the Southern Baptist Convention, Baptist Press has long been the primary supplier of news to state Baptist papers. Now many of those editors are expressing a low level of trust in Baptist Press as a source of reliable and balanced news. At least three state papers have recently run retractions of BP stories.

Though Baptist Press realizes its trust from some Baptist editors is dropping and that secular religion reporters often question its news judgment, the news service no longer needs either. With the advent of Internet technology, Baptist Press can still get information to pastors and other church leaders with or without state papers.

While increasing numbers are using the Internet as a primary means of information, experts warn that there are dangers. With no trained eyes to safeguard that news meets basic journalistic standards before reaching readers, advocacy journalism is finding a large audience through the Internet and other technology.

Most journalists, however, say they don't fear such an approach. They believe accurate, fair and truthful information will continue to be respected and requested by the majority.

Anderson is encouraged by the future. As a religion reporter since 1967, he has seen the evolution of religion coverage in the religious and secular publications, and he anticipates more.

"In the '70s and '80s, a lot of people did 'religion' journalism as a way to do 'religious' journalism, trying to propagate the gospel," Anderson said. "But now there are more and more bright people interested in religion journalism as a serious career."

Waters, too, sees potential for better religion reporting. Taking the lead from the religious press, he hopes religion coverage becomes more mainstream throughout the newspaper, revealing its importance in all aspects of life -- politics, business, sports.

"I hope we keep pushing the envelope," Waters said, "Pushing religion out of its own section and into every section of the paper to show people that faith matters."

Tennessee Baptists approve changes to bylaws; adopt resolutions

By Lonnie Wilkey and Connie Davis

GERMANTOWN, Tenn. (ABP) -- Tennessee Baptists approved bylaw changes giving state-convention institutions a hand in selecting trustees, while leaving final approval of those trustees with the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

That action and others took place during their annual meeting Nov. 14-15 at Germantown Baptist Church, which drew 1,801 messengers.

Tennessee Baptists also elected conservative Knoxville pastor Hollie Miller as president, approved resolutions dealing with the Cooperative Program and the "Baptist Faith and Message," and adopted a record budget of \$36,230,595 for 2000-2001, an increase of 7.2 percent over the previous year.

The resolution on the "Baptist Faith and Message," which underwent revisions last summer that some Baptists found objectionable, acknowledges the Southern Baptist faith statement as an information source, while affirming the Bible as the "final authority for faith and practice."

New bylaw language governing nominations to boards and institutions calls for trustees to be nominated by a committee on boards and mutually agreed upon by heads of agencies and institutions. Individual messengers may amend the committee report, but a new bylaw asks amendments to be made at least 21 days in advance "as a courtesy."

Robert Tyson, chairman of a bylaw-study committee, said the changes would "define the nature of the relationship, clarify the roles of the boards of trustees, protect the integrity of the board-selection process and address the issue of ascending liability."

The change is aimed at ending three years of conflict between the convention and Carson-Newman College, which in 1998 changed its charter to make the school's board of trustees self-perpetuating. In anticipation of the compromise, Carson-Newman trustees filed with the Secretary of State Nov. 9 returning election of trustees to the Tennessee Baptist Convention.

In response, the convention voted to release funding for Carson-Newman that had been held in escrow during the dispute.

Miller, pastor of Sevier Heights Baptist Church in Knoxville, was nominated as president by Adrian Rogers, a former SBC president and high-profile conservative leader of the denomination. Miller defeated Knoxville pastor John Holland by a vote of 798-588.

Messengers rejected an amendment to the resolution on the "Baptist Faith and Message." It called for replacing the word "acknowledge" with "affirm" and specify that the resolution speaks to the "2000 revised edition."

Another resolution affirmed the Cooperative Program, the Southern Baptist Convention's unified funding plan, which was approved 75 years ago when the convention met in Memphis.

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-- Adapted from a longer story in the Tennessee newspaper Baptist and Reflector.

Alabama lawmaker's Baptist faith undergirds debt-cancellation views

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Southern Baptist Congressman who led the fight for the United States to forgive debts owed by poor nations said reading the Bible convinced him it was a moral issue.

Rep. Spencer Bachus, R-Ala., said he reads the Bible daily with his wife. Almost every night, he said, the Scriptures spoke to them about the need for the U.S. to do its share in canceling debts facing the world's poorest countries.

Bachus' support is credited in large part to passage of the bipartisan measure signed into law by President Clinton Nov. 6.

Bachus, a Baptist layman, was first approached on the issue by Bread For the World -- a Christian organization that fights hunger by lobbying Congress to support anti-poverty legislation. As a result of that meeting, Bachus became one of the first Republicans to sign on as a supporter of the international religious movement known as Jubilee 2000.

During that time, "Linda and I read the Bible every night," Bachus told Associated Baptist Press in an interview on the White House lawn after the measure was signed. "It was amazing to us ... -- that almost every night or every other night -- that Scripture just spoke to us about this."

"In reading the teachings of Jesus, we would turn to each other and say, 'debt relief,'" Bachus, a member of Hunter Street Baptist Church in Birmingham, explained. "It was a message to us from God that we were doing the right thing."

After signing the legislation at a White House ceremony, Clinton joked about Bachus' leadership in the effort, which in the beginning was perceived as a Democratic issue. "I embarrassed, I think, Spencer Bachus," Clinton said. "I was afraid it would generate a write-in campaign to beat him in his heavily Republican district, because I said he had absolutely nothing to gain by doing this."

"He just did it because he thought it was the right thing to do," Clinton added.

All the major faiths teach that adherents should help the poorest of the poor, Bachus said, quoting from the New Testament: "To those who have been given much, much is required."

Bachus, a life-long Southern Baptist, said he regrets that the Southern Baptist Convention was not at the forefront of the issue.

The Bread For the World members who first alerted him about the debt-relief initiative were not Baptists but from a Presbyterian Church in his district. Later, he said, members of his Baptist Sunday-school class often discussed the issue with him.

Bachus said Roman Catholics were probably the most active faith group in the effort. While individual Southern Baptists, including Billy Graham and Pat Robertson, threw their support to debt relief, he said, "There was a fear that Southern Baptists are conservative, and this wasn't a conservative idea."

"But this transcends conservative, liberal; Republican, Democrat," Bachus contended. "This is a moral issue."

He said he believes Southern Baptist Convention leaders misunderstood the debt-relief measure. A lot of people think it "is really a massive transfer of money and carries a big price-tag," he said, but it costs only \$1.57 per American. "The cost is so little, but the benefit is so great."

Bachus added that many Americans mistakenly confuse debt relief with welfare. "And too often, welfare has created dependence, and we've given to people who really could help themselves," he said.

Officials at the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission acknowledged that the agency that speaks to moral, ethical and religious-liberty concerns for the convention neither supported nor opposed the debt-relief initiative.

Barrett Duke, vice president for research at the SBC agency, said he wanted to make sure that money in the plan actually goes to help poor people and is not misused. Another concern, he said, is a desire to pressure some countries that receive the help to show a stronger commitment to religious liberty.

Duke held his first meeting with Jubilee 2000 supporters Nov. 4 after a Belmont University religion professor set it up. Duke said the meeting was productive and the ERLC has asked for more information from Jubilee officials as they consider whether to support the movement.

"We're just now, quite frankly, becoming aware of the details of the Jubilee campaign," he said. Duke added, "This is the first contact the Jubilee movement has had with this office that I'm aware of."

But some Jubilee 2000 supporters said they sought but did not receive SBC support earlier.

Don Abramson, volunteer chair of American Jewish World Service based in New York City, is a Jubilee supporter. He said that in late August or early September, "I contacted them twice, hoping they would join the effort, and I got no positive response." He said the calls came at a time when most of the opposition to the effort in Congress came from Republican lawmakers who were Southern Baptists.

The Jubilee supporters eventually won the full \$435 million in the U.S. budget that is needed to fund the U.S. agreement with other nations. But for many months, it looked improbable that the movement would even win \$110 million for the effort.

Mark Harrison, program director with the United Methodist Board of Church and Society, said the Washington office of the Southern Baptist ERLC didn't sign a letter to members of Congress even "when we were still struggling to get the \$110 million."

"We sent them Billy Graham's letter of support and the pope's and Pat Robertson's ... and asked them to sign on, and they never got back to me on that," said Harrison.

"We really needed their support because of the areas of the country where we had big fights were in states where the Southern Baptists are in the majority," he said.

Harrison also said that SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission President Richard Land "has a direct relationship with heads of the Republican Party." Land's involvement, Harrison added, "would have made it easier, but we won it anyway."

ERLC officials said their recent meeting with Jubilee backers was productive and may lead to the endorsing the initiative, but they are still studying the specifics of the campaign.

Bachus said debt cancellation compares to "one of the moral issues of the 19th century -- slavery."

"I think one of the moral issues in the year 2000 is probably the fact that we have two different worlds," he said. "One world is just in complete despair and hopelessness."

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After 33-year wait, Baptist church converting bar into ministry center

By Ken Walker

COVINGTON, Ky. -- As someone who struggled for years with alcoholism, Dennis Northcutt was no stranger to the Salty Dog Saloon in Covington, Ky.

Recently rededicating his life to Christ and joining the maintenance staff at neighboring South Side Baptist Church, Northcutt is back at his old watering hole. This time, however, he is spearheading renovation efforts to convert the old bar into a ministry center.

He joked that it's fitting he works in a bar after spending so many years drinking in them.

"When people walk in the place it makes me feel good and it makes them feel good," he said. "This is going to be a tremendous ministry. The fulfillment in life is here now.

"You'd have to be here to understand the impact," he added. "I see [former customers] all the time, standing across the street. It's hurt 'em. This was their home, like it was mine."

The transformation didn't take place overnight or by accident. Church members call it a tribute to their 65-year-old pastor Harold Pike.

At an age when most people are thinking of retirement, Pike still rides a motorcycle to work, plays basketball and tennis, and works out twice a week. It's not Pike's energy that keeps him going, however, but his vision.

Every few months since 1967, Pike laid hands on the saloon and prayed his church would acquire the building. "God, I don't know when you're going to do it, but I know you will," he often prayed.

Those prayers were answered last spring. Now, the church is moving forward with plans for a ministry center that will feature a variety of classes, activities, family events, job training and a coffee house.

"God did it," said Pike, whose hopes of acquiring the bar in 1973 fell through when the owner raised the price. "And he did it in his timing. I'm learning a lot about God's timing."

A few years ago, Pike's niece and her husband were visiting from Alabama. The pastor joked about how badly he wanted to buy the adjoining bar.

A few weeks later a check arrived from Tuscaloosa. The \$100,000 donation was earmarked for the bar's purchase.

"I almost had a heart attack," he recalled. "I had never seen a check with zeros that big."

But that didn't seal the deal. The owner still refused to sell.

Then, Pike decided to get to know his neighbor. Last year, he started stopping in the bar periodically to sip coffee and talk with the owner and his wife.

When those overtures didn't change his mind, the pastor gave up. He asked his niece if she would mind if the church shifted the money to a long-awaited elevator installation.

But five days before a special business meeting to vote on shifting the funds' use, the bar owner called.

He explained the night before his wife, "who is not a church woman," insisted he close the bar on Sunday. He objected, saying it was the best day of the week. She told him if he couldn't close it that he should sell it. He was offering it to the church for \$111,500.

Although the special donation was drawing interest, Pike wanted to use the dividends for repairs. So he came up with another idea, asking the bar owner to give \$10,000 to the church. He told the man the money would be worth more as a tax deduction than a capital gain.

After consulting a tax advisor, the owner did just that. The congregation raised the remaining \$1,500 the following Sunday. On April 1, the church took title to the property.

"We had a good laugh about it, a good cry about it and praised the Lord," the pastor said. "What's so unique is God's timing. If people had voted to build that elevator, they wouldn't have been near as anxious to buy a bar."

Although volunteers have put in a drop ceiling and scrubbed away years of smoke damage, one feature will stay. A solid walnut bar remains in place as a reminder of the past.

"I want to serve some right stuff over that bar," Pike said. "The wrong stuff was served over it for too many years."

Longtime church members are also overjoyed about the new El Ji Moore Activity Center, named after the generous donors, Elaine and Jimmy Moore.

"I feel like it's an answer to prayer," said Win Gover, a member for 29 years. "Instead of being used as a tool for the devil, it can be used for the Lord now."

He sees the center as a way of attracting inner-city residents who shun churches. Such folks will feel more comfortable in a casual setting than a sanctuary, he said.

This isn't the first time God has worked in miraculous ways at South Side, noted longtime financial secretary Donna Cox.

She recalled how the church was able to buy property for a parking lot and playground in 1986 after local homeowners who vowed to never sell changed their minds.

"We had lots of prayer meetings and that was always a subject of discussion," Cox said of the bar. "I think it's great."

She also lauded Pike, commenting that not many pastors would stay with a church in a low-income neighborhood for so long.

"For 33 years he's been here and that's one of the visions he had," she said. "He held true to these visions. If he hadn't been here, we might have been one of those inner-city churches that closed down."

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Daughter heeds mother's advice to lead ministry at home church

By Ken Walker

COVINGTON, Ky. (ABP) -- When Amy Cummins was 6 years old, she sat in her mother's chair at a Girls In Action meeting and said, "Mom, one day I'm going to go to seminary and be an inner-city missionary like you."

However, while a student at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas Amy gave up her childhood dream of returning home: "I just don't think it would work out."

That is, until Helen Cummins called her one night and said, "There's nobody in the United States who needs help more than the kids in Covington."

So, two months after her May graduation, 27-year-old Amy came back to South Side Baptist Church to become director of the El Ji Moore Activity Center.

"This center was exactly what I was trained to do, finding unique ways of reaching people," she said. "I see this is going to reach a lot of people that aren't being reached."

That includes former bar customers. Even though the church took over the old Salty Dog Saloon last April, some people still wander in to ask if they can buy a drink.

Instead, they often encounter an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting and the offer of a free cup of coffee.

The three AA meetings (two more were recently approved) gathering at the center are the beginning of Amy hopes will be a long list of activities.

Her father, Herbert, is managing a Saturday morning drop-in time, when the church serves up coffee and doughnuts. The building was also used for a back-to-school day last August, when 13 children lined up for free haircuts.

The director envisions a time when students will be able to stop in regularly for tutoring, game nights, exercise and a soda shop.

Her wish list also includes:

-- A coffeehouse, parenting workshops, job-skills training and job placement for adults.

-- A day-care center and monthly meals for seniors.

-- A wide range of other attractions, such as classes in computers, cooking and English; crafts groups, movie nights and a mentoring program.

"It's exciting to see how many people are excited about it, even though we haven't really started," Amy said. "Lots of people are calling asking when computer training is going to start, or when exercise classes will start."

"The great thing about the center is those who wouldn't come in to the church off the street will come there," added Mrs. Cummins, a staff member since 1975. "To me, it will be a great building on a foundation we've laid over the years."

Like many inner-city churches, South Side has dwindled over the years. Sunday-school attendance averages about 175, compared to 400 in the church's prime.

However, pastor Harold Pike points out that through its week-day ministries, the church has boosted its spiritual influence.

"Attendance is lower on Sunday than when I started but we teach the Bible to more people than when the church was in its heyday," he said.

While the activity center will increase its outreach to the unchurched, the church still faces some hurdles to make it a reality.

Thanks to Pike's negotiating skills, it already crossed the first two.

It involved the building's unsightly exterior, a blend of three types of brick and block. The pastor wanted to cover it with a specialized, insulated finish.

However, the costs of hiring a crew were prohibitive. In addition, the company insisted only qualified workers could apply the sand-like coating.

He resolved the problem by convincing the firm to send a manager from New York to train four church members in its application.

The next was gaining approval for a zoning variance from the city's board of adjustments. Although residential, the bar was approved as a non-conforming use under zoning laws enacted in 1984, according to Ed Jody, chief building inspector.

State law requires a hearing when the use of such a property is changed, he said. After two meetings, on Oct. 11 the board approved the use of the property for a community center by a 6-0 vote.

That leaves what may be the largest roadblock, money. Although Amy Cummins' salary is modest, Pike said the church is scraping to come up with the funds to pay her and renovate the center.

"We called for prayer at a staff meeting (recently)," he said. "The devil has thrown up some roadblocks. But we're going to get through this because the Lord's in it."

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