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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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**SBC leader supports Bush actions,  
responds to critics in interview**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The head of Southern Baptists' office of moral, social and religious-liberty concerns voiced support for the first actions of President George W. Bush in a wide-ranging interview with the independent news service Associated Baptist Press.

In a telephone interview, Richard Land, president of the Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, gave high marks to Bush's inaugural address and applauded quick action by the president to end U.S. aid to international family planning groups that promote abortion.

"I thought it was the most overtly religious inaugural address I have ever heard," Land said of the Jan. 20 speech. He cited one quote in particular. In discussing commitments to combat poverty in his speech, Bush said, "I can pledge our nation to a goal: When we see that wounded traveler on the road to Jericho, we will not pass to the other side." An allusion to the Bible story of the Good Samaritan, Land said he found the Jericho reference "particularly moving."

Land said Bush's quick action to curb U.S. aid from flowing to international family planning groups "should come as no surprise."

"Elections have consequences," he said, noting that former President Bill Clinton also signed orders reversing earlier U.S. policy on the issue during his first days in office.

Asked if the ban would undermine efforts in Africa and elsewhere to battle AIDS by teaching high-risk groups to use contraceptives, Land said Bush's action focused on preventing the funding of abortions. "I'm a Protestant, so I don't have any problem with teaching about contraception, particularly to married couples," Land said. "I'm for trying to prevent the spread of AIDS, but I'm not going to be forced to choose between [that] ... and the killing of unborn babies."

Land also answered questions about Bush's selection of former Sen. John Ashcroft to become attorney general. "I find much of the opposition to his nomination nothing less than anti-religious, anti-evangelical bigotry," he said. "It's really religious profiling."

Land said he believed Ashcroft would uphold the law allowing abortion under *Roe vs. Wade*, the 1973 U.S. Supreme Court decision legalizing most abortions. While Ashcroft won't be able to stop legalized abortion, Land said there are other issues -- such as education vouchers, which the Supreme Court has not yet settled -- where the attorney general would be able to advocate conservative Christian views.

Land also responded to comments attributed to Texas Christian Life Commission Executive Director Phil Strickland criticizing Land. In a recent ABP news story, Strickland said Land's endorsement of Ashcroft was "out of bounds" because Land claimed to speak "on behalf of the vast majority of over 16 million Southern Baptists nationwide."

Strickland, who heads up the social-concerns agency for the Baptist General Convention of Texas, said the CLC speaks to Baptists on issues but does not presume to speak for them. "It seems incredible to me that anyone would claim to represent a majority of 16 million Baptists on any issue, much less the appointment of John Ashcroft as U.S. attorney general," Strickland said.

"Count me out of those whom he claims to represent," Strickland said. "My enthusiasm for Sen. Ashcroft as attorney general is greatly diminished by his support for radical cuts in welfare assistance to needy people, his consistent opposition to church/state separation, and his obvious embrace of the political Religious Right."

Land told ABP, "Surely no one would assume that I was speaking for Phil Strickland." Land said he never presumed he "was speaking for all Southern Baptists, but I'm quite certain that I'm speaking for the majority of Southern Baptists, who are very supportive of John Ashcroft."

Land said his own support for Ashcroft was "not anywhere close to being as out of bounds" as opposition to Ashcroft levied by moderate Baptist leader James Dunn in testimony before the Senate Judiciary Committee. "It's one thing to issue a statement of support," Land said. " ... It's quite another thing to give testimony."

Dunn, a visiting professor at Wake Forest Divinity School and president of the Baptist Joint Committee Endowment, testified in opposition to the Ashcroft nomination but led off his comments by declaring that he was speaking only for himself.

Land described Ashcroft as "a man of sterling integrity," and said that some charges levied against him by lawmakers amounted to "race baiting of the worst kind." Land said he disagreed with Ashcroft's decision to give an interview with "Southern Partisan" magazine -- which has been criticized for racist tones. He said he also disagreed with Ashcroft's acceptance of an honorary degree from Bob Jones University. But Land insisted that Ashcroft "is not a racist."

Land said he did agree, however, with Ashcroft's decision as Missouri's attorney general to resist voluntary integration rulings. Those cases, Land said, "involved judicial overreach where the judges basically took control of the schools." The courts were administering and mandating taxes for schools, which is unconstitutional, Land said. It constituted "taxation without representation," he continued. "We had a revolution over that."

But asked if he would apply that term to the fact that residents of the District of Columbia don't have voting members of Congress even though they pay federal income tax, Land said, "I don't think it's taxation without representation."

Land said D.C. is unlike a state. "No one is forced to live in the District except congressmen," he said. "Anyone who wants to can work in D.C. but can live somewhere else. ... They could just as easily live in Virginia or Maryland."

Asked if he would act as an adviser to the Bush administration, Land said, "We are equal-opportunity advisers." He said the ERLC is open to giving advice to either political party.

While acknowledging he has had discussions with Bush administration officials, Land said it would be inappropriate to discuss those conversations. "It's amazing the amount you can get done as long as you don't ask for credit," he said.

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## **Supreme Court schedules hearing on religious use of school facilities**

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The U.S. Supreme Court will hear oral arguments Feb. 28 on a lower court ruling against a Christian youth organization's right to use public school facilities.

The case -- Good News Club vs. Milford Central School -- has spotlighted the differing ways of interpreting the First Amendment's religion clauses. More than a dozen religious and civil liberties groups have filed briefs in the case.

While non-religious groups, such as the Boy Scouts and 4-H Club, were allowed to use school facilities after hours, the U.S. 2nd Circuit Court of Appeals said a New York school district's policy could deny access to the Good News Club.

The Milford Central School District has since 1992 had a policy allowing district residents to use school facilities for holding social, civic and recreational meetings but not for "religious purposes."

The Good News Club -- affiliated with a Christian missionary organization known as Child Evangelism Fellowship -- applied in 1996 to use the school's facilities to have "a fun time of singing songs, hearing [a] Bible lesson and memorizing Scripture."

After reviewing program materials, Robert McGruder, interim superintendent of schools in the Milford School District, described the curriculum as "the equivalent of religious instruction."

The Milford Board of Education denied the application. The club filed a complaint with a U.S. district court in March 1997, charging its free speech, equal protection and religious freedom rights had been violated. The district ruled in favor of the school district and the 2nd Circuit upheld the ruling.

"Although other cases may present difficult questions of line-drawing, we believe that the school authorities, after thorough inquiry and deliberation, correctly determined that the activities of the club fall clearly on the side of religious instruction and prayer," the appeals court ruled.

The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission has filed a friend-of-the-court brief arguing for the club's right to use school facilities for after-school meetings. Also signing the SBC brief were James Dobson's Focus on the Family and Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice.

Also supporting the Good News Club is the Baptist Joint Committee. The BJC signed onto a different brief, however, joined by the National Council of the Churches of Christ, Reorganized Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, General Board of Church and Society of the United Methodist Church and others.

Meanwhile, groups including People For the American Way and the Anti-Defamation League, have filed briefs against the Good News Club.

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## **North Carolina organization appeals to 'mainstream' Baptists**

By Steve DeVane

GREENSBORO, N.C. (ABP) -- Speakers at a Mainstream Baptists of North Carolina meeting Jan. 23 took pains to appeal to conservatives, but clearly voiced their opposition to "fundamentalism." About 180 people from across the state gathered at Greensboro's First Baptist Church to organize a MBNC steering committee, talk about raising money, plan future events and discuss ways to recruit members.

Mainstream organizers hope the group will appeal to the large number of Baptists believed to be on neither extreme of the 20-year controversy between conservative and moderate Baptists. But speakers at the Greensboro meeting made it clear that they hope to keep one group from gaining control of the Baptist State Convention the way conservatives have dominated the national Southern Baptist Convention.

MBNC was formed last year. Most of its members are considered moderates, but several speakers at the Greensboro meeting took issue with that term.

"We're not moderates," said Don Gordon, pastor of First Baptist Church in Mount Olive and chairman of the group's steering committee. "I hope we can ditch that word."

Ken Massey, pastor of the host church, told members of the press not to call the gathering a moderate meeting. He said the group would try to protect the state convention from fundamentalism of either the right or left side of the theological spectrum.

"I believe Mainstream Baptists can be the movement to dissolve the aisle between those who have been called moderates and those who have been called conservatives," he said.

David Crocker, pastor of Snyder Memorial Baptist Church in Fayetteville and moderator of the meeting, said Mainstream Baptists wants to have "as broad a tent as possible." The organization is not related to the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, he said, because that might make "a host of North Carolina Baptists" less likely to be involved.

"We want to work with anyone and everyone who wants to work with us," Crocker said.

Crocker said that although there are some MBNC members who support CBF, there are also some supporters who have never been a part of CBF. Mike Queen, pastor of First Baptist Church in Wilmington, said several CBF churches have made it clear that they do not want to be part of Mainstream Baptists of North Carolina.

"I can assure you that Mainstream is in no way a child of or extension of CBF of North Carolina or national CBF," Crocker said.

The national CBF organization formed in 1991 as a missions-and-ministry alternative to the conservative-dominated SBC.

Jim Burch, a member of First Baptist Church in Greensboro, said political activism in other states is not related to CBF. "For us to be successful, we're going to have to have some political activism ourselves," he said.

Massey said one reason Mainstream Baptists exists is the Baptist State Convention is vulnerable. MBNC can make sure that the politics in the BSC are Christian rather than "hardball" or exclusionary, Massey said.

Tim Dannelly, a layman from Edenton Baptist Church, said Mainstream Baptists follow Jesus, oppose fundamentalism and uphold traditional Baptist beliefs.

Mainstream Baptist churches have members from across the theological spectrum, Dannelly said.

"Your Mainstream church throws its arms and hearts open to the world," he said.

In contrast, fundamentalist churches usually have only fundamentalists who are expected to get in line with the church's beliefs. "They know God's will for your life and sometimes tell you what that is," Dannelly said.

Gordon said MBNC must be "strong and courageous" to oppose fundamentalism, which he called "a perversion of the gospel of Jesus Christ."

"The world is going to continue to make judgments about Jesus Christ based, in part, on the witness of the people called Baptists," he said.

Dannelly said Mainstream churches nourish the priesthood of every believer.

"We want people to have a relationship with Jesus Christ," he said. "The priesthood of every single believer is important to us."

Mainstream Baptists also believe in the separation of church and state, Dannelly said. "We believe in letting politicians be politicians and letting the church be the church," he said.

David Hughes, pastor of Winston-Salem's First Baptist Church, said MBNC will need to hire a full-time head of the organization. He said a MBNC work group set a goal of raising \$100,000 within the next year.

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## **American evangelicalism needs reform, scholar says**

By Marv Knox

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- America's evangelicals need a "reformation" away from rigid boundaries to a more inclusive focus on the "strong center" of faith, argues a Baylor University theologian.

"Reformation is necessary for any movement's vitality and viability," Roger Olson said Jan. 11 in his faculty address at Baylor's George W. Truett Theological Seminary. Olson, a professor of theology at the seminary, said he "enthusiastically and unapologetically" identifies with the evangelical movement. But "once it stops reforming itself," he said, "it dies."

Evangelicalism, a branch of Protestant Christianity that emphasizes personal conversion and the authority of Scripture, is the product of revivals that swept across America in the 17th and 18th centuries. The movement faced a crisis early in the 20th century, Olson said, as modernist theories questioning the miraculous and the Bible's historicity swept through mainline denominations. Out of that struggle came fundamentalism, with its emphasis on interpreting the Scripture as literally true.

However, with a penchant for "majoring in the minors of doctrine, extreme biblical literalism, maximal social and theological conservatism, and seemingly endless schisms and splits over issues such as the details of biblical prophecy," Olson said, fundamentalists became obsessed with theological boundaries to define their faith. Orthodoxy tests included belief in the Virgin Birth and later specific interpretations of Revelation regarding the Second Coming of Jesus.

In the 1940s and 1950, a group of more moderate fundamentalists countered the movement's rigid views. These ministers, Olson said, gave rise to what became to be known as evangelicalism in the last half of the 20th century.

Olson identified four "basic, unifying values and commitments" holding evangelicals together.

"First, the new evangelicalism wished to be centrist with regard to the modern spectrum of Protestant theology," he said. It downplayed both fundamentalism's "extremes of maximal conservatism" and liberalism's "accommodation to modernity."

"It sought to identify and hold firmly to a core -- a center -- of classical, historic Christian belief, while allowing diversity of interpretation and adjustment to culture among those who stayed close to that center," he observed.

"Second, evangelicalism wished to focus its energies on mission and evangelism, rather than doctrinal precision and purity, polemical argumentation and accommodationist apologetics," he added.

"Third, evangelicalism desired to renew Christian higher education ... to avoid anti-intellectual obscurantism so common among fundamentalists and liberal accommodationism so common among mainstream Protestants."

Finally, "the 'glue' that held this evangelical coalition together for decades was the vast Billy Graham Evangelistic Association," he proposed. "All evangelicals revered Billy Graham as a living saint of evangelism and sound theology."

However, with the passage of decades and lately the "fading away of Graham's visibility," evangelicalism is being divided along "old tensions that existed like fault lines just beneath the surface," Olson asserted.

From one side have come accusations of accommodation to American culture, "especially consumerism, individualism, relativism and therapy," he said. Others have expressed concern about resurgent fundamentalism in the movement, particularly "the need to identify evangelicalism's doctrinal boundaries and ... social, political and theological traditionalism."

"There is a plain old power struggle going on within evangelicalism and evangelical theology," he reported. The struggle pits "conservatives," who primarily are Reformed, or Calvinist, inerrantists, against "progressives," who mostly are Arminian non-inerrantists.

The conservatives see progressives as "envelope-pushing upstarts," while the progressives view the conservatives as "beady-eyed heresy hunters determined to dominate the popular concept 'evangelical' for their own ultra-conservative agenda," he asserted.

The conservatives' tendency to build walls of orthodoxy is "extremely ominous for the future of evangelicalism as a broad, irenic, centrist movement and coalition focused primarily on mission and renewal," Olson charged.

"True reform in evangelical theology lies not in this kind of hardening of the categories -- building up fortress-like walls against diversity and creativity and drawing firm boundaries to exclude all but those who agree completely with every item of some 'received evangelical tradition,'" he said. "True reform in evangelical theology lies in striking the right balance ... between unity and diversity, doctrine and experience, and tradition and innovation."

Theological boundaries for evangelicalism should be replaced by "a strong center," he suggested.

"The field of truth -- which is always a bit ambiguous as to its exact scope and extent -- needs a center but does not have to have a firm and unambiguous circumference," he explained. "I like to think of evangelical Christianity as a field of force with a strong gravitational center rather than as a bounded territory where every individual and group is clearly either 'inside' or 'outside.'"

"The center of evangelicalism has always been relatively clear," Olson said. "It consists of conversion to Jesus Christ, commitment to his lordship and deity and development of a personal relationship with him; belief in the triune God of Jesus Christ and the canonical Scriptures as a supernaturally inspired and authoritative witness to him; embrace of the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ as the way of salvation; and passionate dedication to disciplining all people into the way of Jesus Christ.

"The center is both an experience -- called conversion to Jesus Christ -- and a conviction -- called faith in Jesus Christ."

## Theologian describes steps to evangelical reform

By Marv Knox

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Building on his proposal to define evangelical Christianity by its "strong center" instead of its outer boundaries, theologian Roger Olson offered three steps to reform the movement:

-- "Evangelicalism must become comfortable with diversity while maintaining a rough unity," he began.

"Artificial, imposed uniformity is not the way to reform. It is the path toward the death of a movement," he insisted. "Drawing firm boundaries is one way we humans exclude those who for one reason or another make us uncomfortable by challenging our comfort zones."

Evangelicals must learn to include Christians of "like experience" despite differences of class, race, gender and "diverse viewpoints on secondary doctrinal matters," he urged.

"Could it be that some Christians are even closer to the center -- the true heart -- of evangelical faith by virtue of their love for Jesus Christ and obedience to Scripture than are some theologically correct, boundary-patrolling theologians?" he asked. "Let's risk living with fluid, ambiguous, uncertain boundaries and focus on our common center."

-- "Evangelicalism must identify itself as much by experience as by doctrine," Olson maintained.

"I am not in any way suggesting that evangelical theology elevate some universal form of God-consciousness or even some individual feeling of piety ... to the status of touchstone of truth for defining evangelical faith," he said.

"Rather, I am suggesting that we evangelicals ... recognize and acknowledge that the transforming work of God through faith in Jesus Christ and reception of the Holy Spirit is part of the core -- the center -- of what defines authentic evangelicalism and emphasize that as equally important with doctrinal affirmation."

-- "Evangelicalism must value innovation as much as tradition," he declared.

"We evangelicals ... are so profoundly afraid of being accused of theological liberalism that we have made a habit of going boldly only where we have always gone before," he conceded. "We are surrounded by fellow evangelicals who feel it is their calling from God to hunt for heresy and expose heresy where no one has previously found it."

He cited vigorous debates among fervent evangelicals over the meaning of the inerrancy of Scripture and the precise nature of God's knowledge and interaction with the free will of humans.

"Careful, patient, gentle dialogue about biblical materials and about tradition and its importance and defects might benefit all evangelicals," he suggested. "The innovators who remain close to the center ... should be given a fair hearing and not vilified and driven away."

"Evangelicalism's greatest enemy is fear-- fear of change that causes some of its leaders to guard the status quo and inadvertently drains the dynamic, transforming power out of the movement," he concluded.

"Let us overcome fear and embrace new ideas, diversity and vital experience while holding fast to that central, defining core that truly identifies and unites all evangelicals."

## 19th century Baptist leader sets example for today, Wade says

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- A 19th century Baptist preacher set an example for meeting the needs of children and families in the 21st century, Texas Baptist leader Charles Wade said Jan. 19 during Founder's Day at Buckner Baptist Benevolences.

R.C. Buckner, a pastor from Tennessee, saw critical needs among Texas children in the 1870s, and responded by building an orphanage that grew into Buckner Baptist Benevolences, now an agency of the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

Needs today are just as urgent, said Wade, BGCT executive director. Texas Department of Child and Protective Services say more than 40,000 Texas children are in foster care or state conservatorship and close to 900,000 are at risk of abuse or neglect.

"These are children, not statistics," Wade emphasized.

He preached on the Old Testament story of Hagar and Ishmael and God's concern for Abraham's outcast offspring, comparing that situation to 21st century Texas.

"There are children who are alone in Texas," he said. "There are single mothers who have no one to help. There are families that drive one another away. In the midst of family pain like this, God sends his angels to help," Wade said.

"Aren't you glad to be a part of helping the Buckner angels be there on God's behalf for the care of children and families?"

Wade identified four qualities from the life of R.C. Buckner as principles to guide modern-day ministries to families:

-- Christ-like compassion. Effective ministry is motivated by a "compassion so deep and so real that it stirs us to action," Wade observed.

-- Broad cooperation. "Father Buckner" personally helped bring together the two major Baptist conventions in Texas to form the BGCT, and support for Buckner Orphans Home helped keep the convention together through difficult years, Wade noted.

He characterized Buckner Benevolences as "a flagship organization" among the 23 BGCT-affiliated ministry institutions. It is through such ministries and a shared mission that Baptists have found a sense of togetherness, he observed.

-- Creative innovation. Just as "Father Buckner" developed creative new ministries as new needs developed, Buckner Baptist Benevolences has continued to grow and adapt to changing needs, Wade said. He cited international ministries like in Russia, where Buckner Benevolences has led the way in ministering to children and youth in a nation with 1.2 million homeless teenagers and 600,000 children in orphanages.

--Passionate action. "The bottom line is that meeting needs in the new millennium will take plain hard work and sacrifice," Wade said.

## **Muslim convert describes hardships in Bangladesh**

By Marv Knox

DALLAS (ABP) -- Abdul's family almost beat him to death when he turned his back on Allah. Only his mother's love -- and God's grace -- he says, spared his life.

Even 18 years later, Abdul says he risks his life every day in his homeland, Bangladesh, by urging other Muslims to accept Christ as Savior.

Abdul told his story during a recent trip to Texas, where he visited Baptist churches that are supporting Christian ministry among Bengali Muslims. "Abdul" is not his real name. He uses it, he said, to hide his real identity in order to protect his life and the lives of other Christians.

Located on the northeastern border of India, Bangladesh is about the size of Arkansas. But it is home to 150 million people -- 87 percent of them Muslim. Ten percent are Hindu, and fewer than 1 percent profess to be Christian.

"In Bangladesh, we have had the idea that no Muslim can become a Christian," Abdul said. "That idea already has been changed. People are coming to the faith."

But the journey is long, hard and often dangerous, he continued, recounting his own story of family, fear and faith.

"When I was 7 years old, my parents sent me to 'madrasa,' language school, to learn Arabic," he said. "The Koran (the Islamic scripture) is in Arabic. It is Allah's language, holy language."

"After about two years, I started asking questions about Allah. I just wanted to know, but I was treated as a sinner boy." His teachers scolded him: "Your head is too small to understand. If you think too much, you may become mad." Still, Abdul persisted, infuriating the school's headmaster, who reported the boy's misbehavior to his father. His father apologized on behalf of the family, but Abdul was expelled from the school for asking questions.

That led to virtual ostracism. "For seven years, I had no friends," he noted.

In 1982, Abdul found a Koran in Bangla, his own language. In its pages, he recalled, he read two very important messages -- Islam teaches that salvation is only for Arabs, and Jesus was holy.

A year later, he met a Baptist missionary, the first white man he ever had known. "I doubted he was a man," Abdul recounted. But they visited for about 30 minutes.

"I asked him, 'Are you Muslim?'" Abdul said. "He said, 'No, I am a Christian.' So, I asked him, 'What do you believe?' He said: 'I believe in Isa (the Islamic name for Jesus). The New Testament is my holy book.'" Abdul asked for a New Testament, and the missionary gladly gave him a copy.

"I had to be very careful," Abdul said. "I hid the book in my shirt. I took it home and read this book -- the whole thing -- in a night, just like a novel. I didn't sleep. The next night, I read it again."

Abdul found two verses that he said changed his life, John 3:16-17: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but to save the world through him."

"As a Muslim, I was treated as a sinner boy -- no love," he said. "I thought I should commit suicide. But these verses promised eternal life. That night, I received eternal life."

Abdul then got a copy of the Old Testament and began to study it. His missionary friend introduced him to a Christian pastor, who at first was afraid to deal with a Muslim but overcame that fear to teach the 17-year-old boy about Christ.

"I started to join the church," Abdul recalled. "But my dad was very angry, upset with me. 'Why are you going to a Christian church?' he asked me. 'I will tell you -- Christians worship the wrong God.'" His

father forbade him from attending the Christian church anymore, but Abdul instead obeyed his heavenly Father. "I tried hard not to go, but I had to go," he said.

So, Abdul's father called an emergency family meeting to discuss the boy's conversion.

"One of my uncles said they should beat me up, so that the 'evil spirits' would leave me," he reported. A cousin beat him. That night, the family tied him to a bamboo pole and ordered him to burn his Bible.

He refused. Bound outside in the night air, he was covered in mosquito bites.

Later, after his father, uncles and cousins went to bed, his mother sneaked out to him and set him free.

"She was very sad in her heart," Abdul said. "She untied me, put some money in my pocket and said, 'Run away, or they will kill you.' That was the last time I saw my mother." Abdul escaped to Dhaka, the capital city of 10 million people.

"It's a nice place to hide," he said. "I compared the Bible and the Koran, and I decided to take baptism. I wanted to break that idea -- that a Muslim cannot become a Christian."

He presented his desire to the church, which primarily was comprised of believers who had not formerly been Muslims. "I told the church: 'I don't want to give you too much trouble, but I need to take baptism, because Jesus did.' When the message of my baptism got home to my family, my father went to court and said, 'This son is no more related to me.'" For the next three years, Abdul continually wrote letters to his family, declaring his love for them, even though he had embraced Christianity.

Then, he returned to his village, although he was not allowed to meet with his family.

He instead lived with his best friend, who became a Christian after six months. Three years later, Abdul baptized his father, his brother and his sister. He since has seen three other brothers, another sister and the cousin who beat him embrace Christianity.

Abdul's family represents a trend in Bangladesh, he said, noting that in the past six years, 91,000 Muslims from across the country have become Christians. But that hasn't stemmed the tide of persecution, he said.

On the last day of 1998, Abdul visited a hospital to take food to an evangelist who had been beaten because of his faith in Jesus. The same group of people abducted him, beat him unconscious and bloody and left him in a drain for dead, he recounted. He said it took him 15 months to recover from the attack.

Abdul said he has been beaten four times, his financial accounts have been frozen three times and his house has been searched four times.

Others are less fortunate. Muslim militants reportedly killed four Christian evangelists in 1997 and 1998 and two more last year. At least 16 homes of Christians have been burned.

"In every day, in different ways, we are getting persecuted," Abdul said.

Abdul describes himself as a "servant of the whole movement" of Christianity in Bangladesh. "My job is to travel everywhere to serve the people." Specifically, Abdul equips evangelists to spread the gospel. He has a master's degree and owns at least three businesses. He employs and encourages the evangelists, who use their jobs to support themselves while they focus on spreading Christianity throughout Bangladesh.

Despite persecution, Bengali Christians see bright prospects, Abdul said.

"The people have been in prayer, and the Holy Spirit is working," he reported. "The people of Bangladesh have been coming to the faith. Pray for Bengali Muslims."

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