



Associated Baptist Press

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

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

March 1, 2001

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

(01-18)

MAR 06 2001

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Texas missions study committee recommending no change with IMB

By Dan Martin

DALLAS (ABP) -- A Baptist General Convention of Texas committee studying the state's relationship with mission-sending agencies will not recommend defunding of the Southern Baptist Convention International Mission Board, nor will the state organization send its own missionaries, the study-group chairman said in a preliminary report.

Chairman James Denison, pastor of Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, reported on progress of the study Feb. 27 to the BGCT Executive Board.

Denison said the committee, created in 1999, is not scheduled to bring a full report until the Executive Board's May meeting. The final report may include recommendations about changes in Texas Baptists' relationship not only with the IMB, but also with the SBC North American Mission Board and the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, a moderate group that offers churches alternatives to SBC missions and other programs.

While not mentioning the NAMB or CBF in his preliminary report, Denison said in a prepared statement, "[W]e can tell Texas Baptists today that we will not be recommending a change relative to the BGCT's budgetary commitment to the IMB and have never intended such a recommendation."

This year Texas Baptists have budgeted more than \$12.2 million for the Richmond, Va.,-based IMB, just less than 17 percent of the BGCT's total budget.

Denison said the committee has also been asked if it would recommend that Texas Baptists become a mission-sending agency. "We have not discussed such an option and are not planning to make such a recommendation," he said.

The Missions Sending Agencies Study Committee was created by convention action in 1999, when messengers approved a motion by Nathan Porter of Waco, that a committee be created "to examine financial resources, theological positions and missions strategy and philosophy of Southern Baptist mission-sending agencies (SBC, IMB, NAMB and CBF) and report their findings to the BGCT Executive Board."

President Clyde Glazener and Vice Presidents Lorenzo Pena and Bill Ballou appointed the 17-member committee, which began its work in the fall of 1999.

A similar group studying theological education last year proposed significant cuts in Texas Baptist funding of SBC seminaries. Indications are, however, that talks with mission-agency heads are more cordial than last year's. Seminary presidents refused to meet with the entire theological-education study group in Texas, requiring subcommittees to visit each campus. They also asked that all six schools be treated equally in any funding cut and stood together in insisting that all faculty at SBC seminaries agree with recent changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message." Texas Baptist leaders don't like the new document or its being used as a creed.

Denison said his committee "has met with leading representatives from each of the sending agencies -- IMB, NAMB and the CBF."

"Those leaders came to Dallas for extended separate sessions with us, and we are grateful for these dialogues," he said.

The committee is divided into four subcommittees, assigned respectively to the IMB, NAMB, CBF and recommendations.

"Our committee has been hard at work compiling our findings, but we are not finished with our work," Denison said. "We will bring a report of our findings, recommendations and a suggested process for further dialogue with the missions-sending agencies to the Administrative Committee and the Executive Board in May."

Denison said that as the committee did its work, "we became aware of what Texas Baptists are already doing in world missions. It is an outstanding mission effort."

As a result, staff members prepared a video to be shown to the Executive Board demonstrating the scope of Texas Baptist involvement in missions at home and around the world.

The Executive Board approved sending the video to the more than 6,000 churches affiliated with the BGCT. Previously, the Administrative Committee authorized funds for making and duplicating the eight-minute presentation.

In the video, Denison said: "Texas Baptists have always been -- and always will be -- committed to missions. Our missions support and involvement begins right where we are, in our own communities and across our own state, but it doesn't stop there. Through the years, we have given strong support to the national and international missions efforts of our denomination."

"Missions is at the very heart of who we are as Texas Baptists," Denison said. "We are a missions people -- and always have been. One of the major reasons the early pioneer churches in our state organized together was to more effectively accomplish missions, and we have been cooperating together for that purpose ever since."

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-- Bob Allen contributed to this story.

Seminary president offends critics of faith statement

By Mark Wingfield

FORT WORTH, Texas (ABP) -- The revised "Baptist Faith and Message" is not being forced on anyone, and requiring faculty at Southern Baptist Convention seminaries to sign it should not alarm anyone, contends Ken Hemphill, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

Meanwhile, a Georgia pastor whose writings Hemphill cites as an example of why changes were necessary in the SBC's official faith statement has charged the seminary president with misrepresenting his writings. And a former Southwestern professor cited in one of Hemphill's articles also has said his work has been misused.

Hemphill has written two articles about the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message," both posted on the seminary's Web site and mailed by others in printed form to some Texas churches.

One article is titled "Is the 'Baptist Faith and Message' Creedal?" and the other "Is the 2000 Confession Guilty of Bibliolatry?"

"Some among us love to use sound bites to create fear," Hemphill said in introducing the second of his articles.

He then accused critics of the "Baptist Faith and Message" revisions of instilling fear in Baptist people with misinformation, particularly their insistence the revised faith statement is being used as a creed.

"No one can be coerced into believing this confession of faith, but it is appropriate for those who work for convention agencies and institutions to be held accountable to the statement of their convention," Hemphill asserted.

Critics of the SBC's changes to the "Baptist Faith and Message" have said seminary professors should not be required to sign the new faith statement, which they view as narrow and controversial.

Hemphill also addressed critics who have lamented the deletion of a line from the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" that "Jesus Christ is the criterion by which the Bible is to be interpreted." "The 'criterion' language was being used by some unprincipled Baptist scholars to ignore difficult texts, which they did not believe to reflect the character of Jesus," Hemphill asserted. This "loophole to avoid the plain teaching of certain biblical texts persists among moderates," he charges.

His only example is one sentence from a book by Jeff Pool, a former professor at Southwestern who now teaches at Brite Divinity School of Texas Christian University. "Jeff Pool plainly stated that the criterion language was included in the 1963 confession largely in response to Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary professor Ralph Elliott's claim that Melchizidek was a priest of Baal," Hemphill wrote.

Pool said he was unsure whether Hemphill intended to lump him in the category of the "unprincipled scholars" to whom he refers or if the reference was to Elliott. Either way, Pool said, Hemphill is wrong and has confused the debate with ambiguous statements.

"If Hemphill intentionally injected this ambiguity into his allusion to my study, he has willfully distorted communication of the facts and truth, with the aim of deceiving some Baptists by defaming others." The line from Pool's book about Elliott was not Pool's own words but was a quote from Herschel Hobbs, chairman of the 1963 "Baptist Faith and Message" study committee.

Apart from whatever he was attempting to say about Elliott, "Hemphill has failed to offer any example whatsoever of the so-called 'unprincipled Baptist scholars' or moderates whom he accuses of misusing Jesus Christ as the criterion by which to interpret the Christian Scriptures," Pool said.

Also in the article, Hemphill compared the theology of Baptist moderates to the views of a female pastor he once heard on a television news program. This woman justified her service as a pastor by noting Jesus never addressed the issue of women in ministry, he said.

In his view, that discounts the teaching of the Apostle Paul in 1 Timothy 2:12, Hemphill said, and makes Paul's teaching less important than Jesus'.

"The whole of biblical revelation and not some vaguely defined canon of Jesus has always been the definitive authority for historic Baptists," he wrote.

He further explained the changes were necessary to eliminate the possibility anyone might use the "experience of Jesus as the criterion by which we judge the biblical text." He cited a Bible study lesson written by Bob Setzer, pastor of First Baptist Church of Macon, Ga., and published by the Baptist Center for Ethics.

"Setzer argues that Jesus issued a simple two-word creed, 'Follow me,'" Hemphill reported. "Do you see the danger in Setzer's argument? Which Christ are we to follow? Do we follow the Jesus of Mormonism or the Jesus of the New Age movement?"

Setzer wrote Hemphill a letter accusing him of misrepresenting his writings. "The thrust of the lesson argued that at its heart, the Christian faith is a dynamic, unfolding process of knowing, loving and following Jesus," Setzer stated. "Can this Jesus be divorced from Scripture? Absolutely not! Nothing I said suggested otherwise."

Setzer said his quarrel is not with the Bible but "with those who place creedal formulations between the believer and the Scripture."

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Bush outlines agenda in address to Congress

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- In his first address to a joint session of Congress, President George W. Bush outlined a vision for a government that "should be active, but limited, engaged, but not overbearing."

He said that year after year, budget debates in Washington "come down to an old tired argument: on one side, those who want more government, regardless of the cost; on the other hand, those who want less government, regardless of the need. We should leave those arguments to the last century and chart a different course."

The 50-minute nationally televised speech drew applause from both parties at times but at others showed the uphill battle awaiting some Bush proposals in Congress.

Of particular interest to people of faith is the president's faith-based initiative, which he discussed for roughly five minutes of the speech.

"We must encourage and support the work of charities and faith-based and community groups that offer help and love one person at a time," said Bush.

And he drew applause primarily from Democrats when he said, "Government should not fund religious activities." But mostly Republicans stood and cheered for the next line: "But our nation should support the good works of these good people who are helping neighbors in need."

Bush also touted his plan to allow all taxpayers -- including those who do not itemize -- the ability to deduct charitable gifts from their taxable income. It could encourage as much as \$14 billion a year in giving, he said.

In education, Bush promoted school-choice plans and character education. "Values are important," Bush said, "so we have tripled funding for character education to teach our children not only reading and writing, but right from wrong."

And he saluted his wife, Laura, saying, "I like teachers so much, I married one."

Reporters watched closely for reactions from Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton, D-N.Y., who is the first former First Lady to be seated in the chamber as a member of Congress. Also in the audience were one representative from the Supreme Court, military leaders, Cabinet members and others.

Bush touted several initiatives supported by Democrats, including a patients' bill of rights, an end to racial profiling and a prescription drug program for seniors.

His primary focus was a \$1.6 trillion tax cut that he said was urgently needed. The partisanship over the issue was clear. Democrats gave the loudest applause when Bush said, "Some say my tax plan is too big." Republicans stood and cheered when he added, "Others say it is too small." But Bush said, "I respectfully disagree. This plan is just right."

He proposed reducing the taxes married people would have to pay and lowering the top tax rate to 33 percent. "The surplus is not the government's money, the surplus is the people's money," he said.

But Democratic congressional leaders took on the Bush tax plan in their response.

Sen. Tom Daschle, D-S.D., said the tax plan is unfair to middle-income Americans. "The wealthiest 1 percent -- people who make an average of over \$900,000 per year -- get 43 percent of the president's tax cut. Let us be clear: All Americans deserve a tax cut. But surely, the wealthiest among us should not get it at the expense of working families."

Rep. Dick Gephardt, D-Mo., made the only reference to the close 2000 election that put Bush in the White House. "All across America, too many people have lost faith in the fundamental principle of democracy -- the principle of one person, one vote," he said.

"We must restore their confidence," he added, calling on Congress to reform the election process.

Gephardt said Congress could be productive despite an evenly split Senate and a closely split House. "We recognize that the president campaigned on an agenda. So did we," he said. "Where our agendas coincide, let us make quick progress for the people. Where our agendas differ, we ask the president to demonstrate his leadership by reaching out for the benefit of all Americans."

Bush also spoke of bipartisanship, saying that "it is more than minding our manners, it is doing our duty."

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Justices consider Christian club's use of public school facilities

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- U.S. Supreme Court justices heard oral arguments Feb. 28 in a dispute over whether a Christian youth organization should be allowed to meet with children directly after school hours in an upstate New York public school.

While the high court has before ruled in favor of religious groups using school facilities to discuss secular topics from a religious perspective, this raises new questions.

In 1996, the Good News Club -- affiliated with a Christian missionary organization known as Child Evangelism Fellowship -- applied 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, Milford School District officials said the proposed activities were not merely discussion of secular subjects from a religious perspective, but "were in fact the equivalent of religious instruction itself."

The Milford Board of Education denied the application, and the club filed a complaint with a U.S. district court in 1997. After appeals, the case reached the 2nd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals, which sided with the school.

Arguing before the Supreme Court for the school district, Frank Miller said that events of the Good News Club amount to religious worship, which is not allowed under district policy. "We have the school in effect utilized as a church," Miller said.

But the Good News Club attorney, Thomas Marcelle, asked why other groups that teach moral instruction, like the 4-H Club and the Boy Scouts, may use the school while the Christian group cannot.

"This is a free-speech case," Marcelle said. "We're not asking for unique access, just equal access." He said the only children who attend are those whose parents have sent them.

Justices spent a lot of time discussing what constitutes "religious worship."

Associate Justice David Souter said the program appears to be religious worship similar to a "Sunday school" class.

But Associate Justice Antonin Scalia said, "Teaching the Scripture, teaching what the Scripture has to say about morality, I think it's a great distortion to call that religious worship, even if you do throw in a prayer or two."

Chief Justice William Rehnquist agreed, saying, "It certainly isn't religious worship in the way most people would think of it."

And Associate Justice Stephen Breyer said, "Sounds like you're discriminating in free-speech terms against religion."

Other justices seemed troubled by the age of the children involved.

"Isn't the nub of the matter in this case that you're not dealing with college students, you're dealing with grade-school students?" Souter asked. Older students are mature enough to know the school is not endorsing the religion. "In this case you have a bunch of kids who just don't make that distinction," he said.

Other concerns included the fact that the event, which takes place just as the school day closes, is not student initiated and is organized by a group of outside adults. Associate Justice Sandra Day O'Connor asked why that mattered. "I assume the Girl Scouts are adult sponsored," she said.

Rehnquist agreed. "You wouldn't have a bunch of fourth graders in there talking" on their own, he said.

The case -- Good News Club v. Milford Central School -- has highlighted the numerous interpretations of the First Amendment's religion clauses held by religious and civil-liberties advocacy groups. More than a dozen briefs have been filed with the court.

Following the oral arguments, Brent Walker, executive director of the Baptist Joint Committee spoke to reporters on the Supreme Court steps. The BJC signed onto an amicus brief in support of the club's right to use the facilities.

Walker criticized the 2nd Circuit's distinction between clubs discussing secular topics from a religious perspective, which is permitted, and religious instruction and worship, which is not.

"The free-speech and free-exercise rights of students should not turn on such dubious hair-splitting," Walker said. "The government is uniquely ill-suited to sit as a secular high priest making razor-thin theological distinctions."

The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission also filed a friend-of-the-court brief in support of the Good News Club. Also signing the SBC brief were James Dobson's Focus on the Family and Pat Robertson's American Center for Law and Justice.

But other groups -- such as People For the American Way, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and some Jewish organizations -- have filed briefs in opposition to the Good News Club's use of the facility.

Observers believe justices are leaning toward the Good News Club's position. A decision is expected by the end of June.

The Supreme Court has ruled previously, in 1993, that a New York church could not be denied after-hours use of school facilities to show a film addressing family issues when the school district permitted other community groups to address the same topic from non-religious perspectives.

While observers are hoping the new case will clear up gray areas related to past court rulings on church-state issues, justices may write a very narrowly tailored decision that doesn't alter precedents. As Justice Scalia pointed out in the courtroom, "Trust me, we can write this opinion so it's almost nothing."

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Baylor author's festival explores faith in literature

By Marla Pierson

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- Many Christians tend to flock to "Religion" sections in their favorite book stores, but spiritual themes are cropping up in other places as well.

To draw attention to the trend, Baylor University recently featured a festival of literary voices from Anne Lamott to Lee Smith and Bret Lott at the Baptist-affiliated school's second annual Art & Soul conference.

A crowd of hundreds gathered on the Waco, Texas, campus to hear Lamott, author of critically acclaimed novels and the best-selling non-fiction books including "Traveling Mercies: Some Thoughts on Faith" and "Bird By Bird: Some Instructions on Writing and Life."

Scholarly sessions addressed the work of writers such as C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams and J.R.R. Tolkien.

Three-time Grammy winner Bruce Hornsby gave a Saturday night concert, while contemporary Christian musician Margaret Becker led a workshop in song-writing -- both new events but a natural extension of the conference's aim.

Workshops on writing for peace and justice were new this year -- a theme that emerged from author John Grisham's talk during the conference last year, said Greg Garrett, director of Religious Faith and Literary Art at Baylor.

Garrett said he is already fielding requests from secular publishers to get their authors on the program and that this has quickly become one of the largest events of its kind.

"It's just unbelievable," he said. "We think this is one of the best programs that Baylor puts together, and it's one of the most illustrative of what Baylor can be and should be."

In a way, the interjection of faith into writing is nothing new.

Even as far back as the Epic of Gilgamesh in ancient Babylon, literature explores the relationship between man and the gods and addresses man's attempt to find meaning, Garrett said.

But until recently, he said, there was a sense that Christian writing was by Christians and for Christians -- "that art had to be the servant of religion, as opposed to another and perhaps equally compelling way to communicate ultimate meaning."

The writers at the Baylor conference, on the other hand, may be Christian, Jewish or Buddhist, but they are writing for a larger crowd, working "to create the most compelling art they can and trust that it can speak to people," Garrett said.

"The things we believe most strongly and profoundly come out in our writing," said Garrett, reiterating a lesson he learned in his own life.

And that can even be a surprise to the author.

Raised in a conservative Christian home, Garrett rebelled against religion. Writing brought him back.

"As I started to tell the truth in my work, I became more and more aware there was something missing in my life," Garrett said.

For Lee Smith, author of nine novels and three collections of short fiction, religion naturally weaves its way in.

"I go to church. My characters go to church," she said. "To write fiction, I think you have to write about what your characters care about." Lott, who wrote the Oprah Book Club selection "Jewel," prefers not to talk about the intersection of art and faith. "I don't believe it actually intersects it," he stressed. "I believe it's encompassed by it."

A veteran of numerous conferences and workshops, Lott sent a paper to be read at last year's conference and attended for the first time this year. "I think it's fantastic," he said. Unlike other gatherings, "this one reveals and talks about the truest dimension: That art is to be redemptive. It has something more than just crafting a good sentence."

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-- Marla Pierson writes for the Tribune-Herald in Waco, Texas.

Cremation gaining respect among Christians, others

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- When Carolyn Leverett's husband died unexpectedly three years ago, she reluctantly complied with his request to be cremated.

Now the Baptist laywoman is making advance plans for when she dies, and she knows one thing for sure: She wants to be cremated and have her remains co-mingled with those of her late husband.

What's happened over the last three years to sway her opinion so strongly? She became the owner of a funeral home and crematory that performs about 200 cremations a year.

Both her personal attitude and her business stand at the head of a growing trend in American society. Cremation is a red-hot business.

In many regions, cultural and religious concerns about cremation are disintegrating.

More than one-fourth of all Americans who died last year were cremated, according to estimates from the Cremation Association of North America. That's up from less than 10 percent in 1980.

By the Cremation Association's estimates, the trend toward embracing cremation will continue to grow in the years ahead, with one third of all the deceased being cremated by 2010. In some regions, such as the Mountain West and New England, the percentage of bodies being cremated could surpass 65 percent by 2010.

A 1999 study by Wirthlin Worldwide confirmed this trend by polling a random sample of American adults. The Wirthlin poll, conducted for the Funeral and Memorial Information Council, found those reporting they intend to choose cremation for themselves or their loved ones increasing to 46 percent, up from 32 percent in 1990.

Experts in the funeral business sometimes offer this comparison to illustrate the growing acceptance of cremation: When President John F. Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, the cremation rate in the United States was about 3 percent. The Roman Catholic Church, of which Kennedy was a member, had only two years earlier dropped its ban on cremation, and Catholic priests in the U.S. generally did not allow cremated remains to be brought into church buildings for a funeral mass.

Fast-forward to 1999, when John F. Kennedy Jr. was killed in a plane crash. He was cremated and had full Catholic services.

Because of differences in church polity, Baptists never had an official ban on cremation, although the practice has been rare. Traditional casket burials remain by far the most common practice among Baptists, but cremation is a growing trend in urban areas of the state, according to a number of pastors who conduct funerals.

Bob Beck is a longtime Texas pastor, now serving as interim pastor of First Baptist Church of Bedford. He has seen the trend toward embracing cremation not only among the churches he has served but among his own family as well.

In addition to those actually choosing cremation, "there has been a very marked increase in the number of people who are considering that as a possibility," he said.

He told the story of a series of tragedies that killed all three members of a family in one church he served -- the mother, father and a son. All three family members were cremated over that period of time. Ultimately, all three urns were placed together in a mausoleum.

Such a story simply could not have been told 10 or 15 years ago, Beck said. It wouldn't have happened.

At Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, cremations also are on the rise, said Leroy Summers, minister to older adults. Because he's served the church 18 years and knows many of the older members, he spends a great deal of time helping people make funeral arrangements.

"In those 18 years, I've seen a lot more people opting for cremation," Summers said.

The question often arises when he's working with church members in funeral pre-planning, and it's not because he raises the topic, he said.

"Many people are opting for cremation. It's less expensive, and burial costs have gotten so high. My own counsel with them is it's something they have to feel right about."

Hawaii, Washington, Nevada, Oregon and Montana lead the nation in percentage of cremations, each with more than 55 percent of all deaths handled by cremation last year.

In other parts of the country, including parts of the Bible Belt, the practice remains less common. Cremations account for less than 10 percent of all deaths in Alabama, Mississippi, West Virginia, Tennessee and Kentucky.

Guy Thompson, owner of Thompson's Harveson & Cole Funeral Home in Fort Worth, Texas, has been in the business 63 years. During that time, he's seen cremations grow from less than 1 percent of his business to about 20 percent.

He does not advocate cremation and said he would not choose it for one of his own family members unless the body had been subjected to severe trauma before death or at the time of death.

Traditional burial offers more dignity and respect for the body, Thompson said. "The body to me is very sacred because it was the vessel that housed the soul of a person."

People today choose cremation over burial for a number of reasons, and Thompson doesn't discount or discredit those choices. However, he sees the trend toward cremation fitting in with other societal trends, including lack of interest in family burial plots.

The reasons for embracing cremation are varied, experts report. And there doesn't seem to be a common profile of who favors cremation and who doesn't.

"It isn't just people who cannot afford a regular burial, though that is a part of the picture," Beck said. "It's people who choose not to have a burial plot. For them, it's a matter of taking up space. It's people who don't want to have a grave to remind the family of their loss. It's environmental sometimes. ... There's also some simplicity in it."

"It's just a style," he concluded. "It's a rapidly increasing style of dealing with the body of a deceased person."

All these factors were considerations for Leverett's husband in his request to be cremated.

He liked the simplicity of it, the economy of it, the logic of it, said Leverett, owner of Heritage Funeral Home and Crematory near Baylor Hospital in Dallas.

For his funeral, Leverett used what's known in the trade as a "rental casket," a beautiful hardwood casket that would cost thousands of dollars to purchase outright. Though not obvious to family and friends viewing the casket, the box has something like a tailgate on one end. The body actually rests in a cardboard insert that slides into and out of the wooden casket.

Though not all bodies to be cremated are embalmed, Leverett chose to have her husband embalmed because she wanted a more traditional visitation time and memorial service. After that, the casket liner holding the body was easily removed and taken to the crematorium.

She keeps a portion of his ashes at home. That's the part she wants to have co-mingled with her own ashes after her death.

But she took part of her husband's remains to Branson, Mo., one of their favorite vacation spots.

"We always hated to see the time coming when we had to go home," she explained. "So I spread his ashes there, and I said, 'Now you can stay here; you don't have to go home.'"

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EDITOR'S NOTE: State-by-state statistics on cremation are available from the Cremation Association of North America at their Web site, www.cremationassociation.org

Religious concerns about cremation fading

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- As cremation becomes more popular in the United States, fewer people are asking serious theological questions about the practice. But such indifference has not always been the norm.

"I don't think there's any doubt but that Christian tradition started off in favor of burial and against cremation on the grounds that resurrection would be easier for God to pull off," said Steven Davis, professor of philosophy and religious studies at Claremont McKenna College in Southern California.

Davis, a graduate of Princeton University's Divinity School, is one of few American theologians to have addressed this issue. He is author of a book titled "Risen Indeed: Making Sense of the Resurrection."

Although the Greeks and Romans practiced cremation prior to the time of Christ, early Christians generally viewed it as a pagan practice, according to Davis and other historians.

One of the major arguments against cremation by Christians is anticipation of a bodily resurrection at the Second Coming of Jesus. The Apostle Paul, for example, talks about a "resurrection body" in 1 Corinthians 15.

"The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable," Paul wrote. "It is sown a natural body, it is raised a spiritual body."

Most Baptists and most evangelical scholars agree that the Bible teaches a bodily resurrection from the dead. "If there is no resurrection of the dead, then not even Christ has been raised," Paul wrote.

From the first century until now, no one this side of heaven has had knowledge of how that bodily resurrection will take place. But early Christians seemed to think the physical body ought to be preserved as much as possible through burial, Davis noted.

"That argument gets a little dicey when you imagine that some bodies of Christians who are going to be resurrected will have been in the ground 2,000 years or more," he noted. "It doesn't seem like it's any more difficult for God to resurrect someone whose body has been in the ground 2,000 years than someone who was cremated," especially if you believe God is all-powerful.

The old assumption was "that resurrection can only happen if God can look about and find the atoms or molecules of which my body consisted and put them back together," Davis said.

Scripture doesn't necessarily teach that, but the Bible is fairly vague on the details of burial and resurrection, he noted.

Many Christians today have a strong belief in bodily resurrection without believing the physical body must be preserved to make that happen.

"A lot of contemporary people think God can resurrect Steve Davis even if God doesn't find a single atom of what once was me," Davis said. "God can take whatever is available and configure those atoms in a Steve Davis way, and it will be me.

"The bottom line is, I don't think it makes any theological difference at all whether a person is buried or cremated," said Davis, who added that he is not an advocate for cremation.

When his wife of 38 years died last year, he had her buried in a traditional way.

His choice of a traditional burial "had nothing to do belief in the resurrection," he said, even though he believes in resurrection.

The choice of cremation over burial is simply a personal preference, according to Guy Thompson, president of Thompson's Harveson & Cole Funeral Home in Fort Worth.

Although he's not an advocate of cremation either, about 20 percent of his business is in cremations. A devout Catholic, Thompson has worked closely with Baptist ministers for 63 years.

"Christian people would not participate in cremation for a long time because it was thought to be unkind to the body," he explained. The practice was associated more often worldwide with non-Christian or pagan peoples, he added.

Those concerns are seldom expressed today, said Bob Beck, a longtime Baptist pastor who has worked with Thompson on many funerals.

"I honestly have not run into a rabid opinion about theological concerns on anyone's part in recent years," Beck said. "If there is anything, it's just a quiet question: I don't know whether I would want to do that or not. I haven't heard anybody clearly enunciate a theological objection."

Likewise, Leroy Summers, minister to older adults at Park Cities Baptist Church in Dallas, confirms he hears no theological objections to cremation.

Arguments that cremation might somehow diminish God's ability to resurrect a body are inconsistent, Summers and Beck agreed.

"Most of us cannot really imagine the greatness of God," Summers said. "What about people who have been burned in a plane crash, or during the war or have been sunk in ships? Somehow God's going to care for those. The Scripture says 'ashes to ashes ...'"

"It is utterly inconsistent that people would think that any decayed body -- however that might have decayed, naturally, in the ground or in the ocean or in a fire -- could not be resurrected by our omnipotent God," Beck added.

Carolyn Leverett was apprehensive about having her husband cremated after his death. But the Cedar

Hill Baptist laywoman, who owns a funeral home in Dallas, heeded the wishes of her late husband anyway.

"He explained it to me in terms of general science, that matter can be neither made or destroyed but you can change its form."

A dead body will deteriorate regardless of what is done to it, Leverett continued. To her husband, "dust to dust and ashes to ashes in a short time made more sense."

Cremation may be faster and appear more expedient, but family members should carefully consider their choices, advised Thompson. He believes there's psychological value in knowing exactly where a loved one is buried and being able to visit that place.

In cases where his clients choose cremation, he works to provide the most meaningful memorial service possible. He encourages families choosing cremation to have a traditional memorial service before the cremation if possible.

"I still feel like people are better off if they can say goodbye to the body," he said. "This provides confirmation that they indeed are dead."

If the body has been cremated before the service, he always places an empty chair and a small table in the place where the casket normally would be, symbolizing the person who is no longer present.

Thompson also encourages family members to have something at the service that symbolizes who the deceased was and what they will be remembered for. One family brought a wheelbarrow filled with garden tools. Another brought a bugle. Others bring photographs.

"Symbols can be very meaningful," he said.

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Cremation makes for wide range of portable memorial products

By Mark Wingfield

DALLAS (ABP) -- It's now possible to keep Grandma close to your heart after death.

If she's cremated, a portion of her remains may be placed in a special Keepsake Pendant that can be worn around the neck. In fact, portions of Grandma's remains may be spread out among all the grandchildren in multiple lockets to be worn or displayed.

This is just one of the trends in cremation-related products, spawned by the rapidly increasing acceptance of cremation as a means of final disposition.

"We used to leave our loved one at the grave site and walk away. Now with cremation, we can take our loved one with us," said Kraig Pike, owner of The Urn Store.com, an Internet vendor of what Pike calls "personalized memorials."

Cremated remains, known in the business as "cremains," may be placed in wind chimes, stored in drawers beneath a home-size eternal flame, mixed in with paint used to create a unique piece of framed art for the home or mixed with concrete to form man-made reefs strategically placed on the ocean floor to help keep nature in alignment.

Of course, cremated remains also may be scattered in a favorite place or kept in a wide assortment of decorative urns.

Cremated remains also may be buried the old-fashioned way or placed in a special niche at a cemetery or church called a columbarium.

Despite all the fancy alternatives, interment in the ground or a columbarium remains the most popular final resting place for cremains.

Baptist ministers report seeing an increasing number of cremations, but those cremated remains usually end up in a cemetery. They know of few cases of the more creative distribution of human remains.

That coincides with national trends reported by the Cremation Association of North America. Of all bodies cremated in the United States in 1996, nearly 41 percent had their remains interred at a cemetery.

Another 36 percent of remains were given to family members to take home. These remains were believed to have been buried, placed in a columbarium, scattered or kept at home.

Eighteen percent of cremated remains were scattered by funeral home personnel as directed by the next of kin.

The remaining 5 percent of all cremated remains were not claimed. Unclaimed remains generally are stored by cemeteries or funeral homes or disposed of in other legal means, the report says.

Cremation has put matters of final disposition of a loved one's remains in the hands of family members like never before. Funeral homes sell some products, such as urns. But other products and services are sold on the open market, especially via the Internet.

For example, The Urn Store.com lists 15 categories of urns, from burial urns to fine art urns to golf-theme urns.

But urns no longer are the primary thing sold by The Urn Store.com, said Pike, the owner. He also sells wind chimes (in soprano or alto), glass art blown by an artist with parts of the loved one's remains mixed in, lockets and a trademarked product called the EternaLight.

The EternaLight comes in two sizes, one small enough to be held in your palm and the other more appropriate for prominent display. Each unit features a small drawer in the base where a portion of the loved one's cremated remains may be kept. The base supports a glass dome covering an electronically simulated flame. The glass may be etched with type or a design.

Promotional copy for the product explains, "When the funeral service is over, the flowers have wilted and the caregivers have gone away, EternaLight's warm, soothing 'Flame of Love' will still be glowing."

Locketts, however, are the No. 1-selling item at The Urn Store.com, Pike said. Locketts designed to carry portions of cremated remains come in a variety of sizes, shapes and finishes. Some are shaped like little urns, others like stars or hearts or glass domes.

One of the most unique uses for cremated remains is offered nationwide by Eternal Reefs, based in Decatur, Ga.

For \$850 to \$3,200, the cremated remains of a loved one may be mixed with cast concrete to form a man-made reef. The larger, more-expensive reefs are anchored to the ocean floor by themselves. The smaller reefs are stacked together to form larger reef walls.

The reefs are strategically placed in oceans around the world as part of a conservation effort to enhance sea life. To date, Eternal Reefs has built reefs in 1,500 sites.

Each reef may be labeled with a bronze plaque, and adventurous family members are allowed to dive into the ocean to see the reef in action. Photographs provided by the company show the reefs beginning to attract sea life after three months and fully integrated into sea life after three years. The product is designed to last 500 years.

If you can't make it to the ocean floor to view the reef personally, the company will videotape the site for you.

While all these products may sound peculiar to traditionalists, they serve a very traditional purpose, Pike said. They help a family remember and cherish their loved ones.

"We're meeting the family's need to remember," he explained. "If they choose to do that through cremation, we have products available to help them."

Sidebar: Cremation facts

Q. Is cremation cheaper than a traditional burial?

A. Yes, usually. Though not the only reason people choose cremation, cost often is a strong influence. Cremation eliminates the need for one of the most expensive funeral items, the casket. Caskets sell for \$2,000 up to as much as \$10,000, although some cheaper alternatives are available via the Internet. Also, if a body is to be cremated, it does not have to be embalmed, particularly if there will be no visitation or viewing. If a body to be cremated is to be viewed by friends and family, funeral homes offer rental casket options that are much cheaper. Other costs potentially eliminated through cremation include the purchase of a burial plot, purchase of a grave liner and payment for opening and closing the grave, a service which can run up to \$1,000 in some cemeteries. Cremation services may be purchased for less than \$1,000 in some areas.

Q. What other expenses are associated with cremation?

A. Depending on what type of services are desired, additional expenses could include embalming, funeral arrangements, purchase of an urn or other memorial container, purchase of space in a cemetery or columbarium.

Q. What happens when a body is cremated?

A. The body, usually enclosed in a plain wooden box or heavy cardboard box, is inserted into a cremation chamber, where temperatures will reach 1,500 to 2,000 degrees Fahrenheit. After two-and-a-half to three hours, the process of heat and evaporation will have reduced the body to a collection of bone fragments, not ashes. These remains are collected in a hopper at the bottom of the chamber and then packaged for appropriate distribution. Some crematories provide further processing of these bone fragments to create a more uniform consistency of tiny pieces.

Q. Can cremated remains be scattered anywhere?

A. No. Cremated remains may only be scattered in areas where prior approval has been received and where allowed by law. While scattering fulfills the desires of some individuals, it can be a traumatic experience for other survivors, experts say.

Q. Are family members allowed to witness the cremation?

A. Yes, if desired, most cremationists will allow family members to witness the insertion of the body into the cremation chamber. In some cultures, it is traditional for a designated family member to push the button to begin the cremation process. The actual cremation process, though, takes place within a closed chamber and cannot be viewed.

Q. What is the weight of a typical body's remains?

A. The remains of an average size adult usually weigh from 4 to 6 pounds.

END
