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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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**News briefs from
Associated Baptist Press**

Editor's wife dies

ALBUQUERQUE, N.M. -- Kathy Loudat, 47, wife of Baptist New Mexican Editor John Loudat, died March 8 at Manzano Del Sol Good Samaritan Village in Albuquerque, N.M., where she had been cared for seven years.

She was badly injured in an automobile accident in April 1991 and never recovered. Her husband, editor of the weekly news journal of the Baptist Convention of New Mexico, remembered her as a ministry partner and local-church worker -- who played piano, directed choirs and taught Sunday school, discipleship, missions organizations and vacation Bible schools -- and as a devoted mother.

The family established the Kathy Loudat Memorial Fund in her honor and suggested that memorial gifts to the fund be sent to the New Mexico Baptist Foundation, P.O. Box 16560, Albuquerque, N.M. 87191-6560. (ABP)

Publisher starts work on new curriculum line

MACON, Ga. -- Smyth & Helwys Publishing in Macon, Ga., has formed an advisory team for development of a new line of curriculum for preschoolers and children.

The independent publisher announced plans for the new materials during its recent 10th anniversary celebration.

Hazel Morris, associate professor of childhood education at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary; Leon Castle, a Christian educator for more than 30 years; Diane Smith, a pre-school/children's ministry consultant with the Baptist General Association of Virginia; and Reby Fisher Lawler, minister of childhood education at Trinity Baptist Church in San Antonio, Texas, comprise the advisory team, which planned to begin its work with a two-day retreat in Macon in mid-March. (ABP)

Woman named college president

BLUE MOUNTAIN, Miss. -- Mississippi College administrator Betty Rogers Coward has been named president of Blue Mountain College, a four-year women's school supported by the Mississippi Baptist Convention.

Coward, 57, academic vice president at Mississippi College in Clinton, replaces 35-year president Harold Fisher, who is retiring.

Blue Mountain is a 128-year-old school in northern Mississippi that enrolls about 400 students. It offers a Christian education for women, along with a coordinate academic program for men preparing for church-related vocations.

"I understand and embrace the role of Christian colleges in preparing graduates whose lives will reflect a faith-based educational experience," Coward said in a press release. "Joining with the constituents of this fine institution to continue the rich tradition of preparing community and denominational leaders is an opportunity I eagerly anticipate." (ABP)

University names consultant for church-leadership center

NASHVILLE, Tenn. -- A former denominational worker who recently retired as a pastor has joined Belmont University as senior consultant for the 5-year-old Moench Center for Church Leadership.

Joe Stacker, who retired March 1 as pastor of Belmont Heights Baptist Church in Nashville, Tenn., assumed the new job immediately. In the position he will build a network of partnerships and teach courses at the Baptist-affiliated school in Nashville.

Stacker previously worked as church administration director for the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board, now called LifeWay Christian Resources, in Nashville. (ABP)

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Missionary doctor learns from Thai rice farmers

By Ken Camp

DALLAS (ABP) -- Medical missionary Ascanio Peguero found his work among the Rock People of northern Thailand difficult and discouraging, until he learned to draw a parable from the practices of local rice farmers.

Four years ago, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship assigned Peguero and his wife, Yanira, to Southeast Asia to do community-based health development.

Their work focuses on sharing their faith through a health-and-hygiene project among the Rock People, an unreached people group so named because they live in barely habitable rocky, mountainous areas.

"At the beginning, it was very hard just to get the people to receive us," said Peguero, a graduate of the University of Santo Domingo and Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas.

The Rock People's religious beliefs are a homegrown mixture of Animism and Buddhism. Christianity's teachings are foreign to them in every sense.

"They were cautious and suspicious," Peguero said. "It took months and months of working with them."

Peguero found his work disheartening until he noticed how the rice farmers in northern Thailand did their work.

"They would break the ground, then water the land, then break the ground again, then water it again before they would ever plant the seeds," he recalled.

In images reminiscent of Jesus' parable of the sower, it dawned on Peguero that the gospel message he was eager to share was like the seed. The local culture, meanwhile, was like hard ground that would have to be softened and broken up before he could even think about effective evangelism.

"I would have to break the ground and water the land," he said. "How? By loving the people and showing them God's love in every way possible."

The Pegueros and their three children -- ages 7, 13 and 14 -- live and work among the Gmong Khmur group of Rock People. In all, the Rock People are believed to number between a half-million and 1 million in Southeast Asia, with 5,000 to 6,000 of them living in northern Thailand.

The Pegueros set up mobile clinics in nine villages throughout Thailand's Chiang Mai province, where they provided health care and taught hygiene and nutrition.

"I sometimes see 100 [patients] a day in the clinics," Peguero said.

While the Pegueros have been ministering throughout the province for four years, much of their work has focused on the village of Huai Makliam.

The missionaries surveyed the village and drew detailed maps that numbered the homes, provided census-type information about residents, identified health-related problems, explored the existence -- or lack -- of sanitation systems, and identified water sources.

They discovered 115 families living in 97 homes. Only 27 of the homes had sanitary latrines, 25 had latrines that Peguero considered non-sanitary, and 45 had no latrines at all. Of the 479 people surveyed, 202 did not use latrines, and 117 used non-sanitary latrines.

The Pegueros met with village elders to explain that by spreading human waste on the fields surrounding the village, their people were transmitting parasites, spreading disease and attracting flies and rodents. They taught them the importance of sanitary latrines, came to an agreement about how to build them, and helped them train their people to use them.

Baptists in Texas support the Pegueros' work with funding for a community health-development project among the Rock People in an annual world-hunger offering collected by the Baptist General Convention of Texas.

"What does that have to do with hunger?" Peguero queried. "By using the latrines, the people were avoiding the transmission of parasites. And it enabled them to keep grain in their homes to feed their families, because there were fewer rodents."

The Pegueros also have distributed food and vitamins to pregnant women and infants, and they have taught the people the importance of nutrition.

Black beans grow well in the region, and the Rock People commonly have picked the beans and sold them. Yanira Pegueros has taught them how to cook the highly nutritious beans with rice as a food source for their families.

As they have worked month after month with the Rock People and earned their trust, the Pegueros slowly have been able to see a few embrace the Christian faith. One example was Soy, a 16-year-old girl who came to live with the Pegueros to help them in the clinics.

"At first, her mother was doubtful," Ascanio Peguero said. "This is a culture where young girls are sold into prostitution. But the head man in the village went to her and said, 'You can trust these people. They are Christians.'"

Soy's mother grudgingly agreed. She not only allowed her daughter to work with the Baptist couple, but also began to attend classes that they offered in her village.

"Eventually, she came to the Lord," Peguero said. "In time her husband, who had a serious drinking problem, also came to know the Lord, and his drinking problem stopped."

The Pegueros, who currently are on furlough in Texas, plan to return to Thailand in June. Their long-term goal is to see the Rock People learn how to become self-sufficient, providing a healthy environment and adequate food for their families. But even more than that, they want to see indigenous churches develop in the villages where they work.

"The people are becoming more open to the gospel as they come to have a better quality of life," Peguero said.

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