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Baptist Press

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April 5, 2001

(01-28)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Southern Baptists ending talks with Roman Catholics
- Christian Scientists qualify for federal funds, courts say
- How do pastors prepare for once-a-year Easter crowd?
- Children common ministry need to all family types, researchers say
- Brother's weight-loss success funds sister's overseas adoption

**Southern Baptists ending
talks with Roman Catholics**

By Bob Allen

ATLANTA (ABP) -- Southern Baptist leaders have informed the Roman Catholic Church that they are cutting off official conversations between the two groups that have been going off and on for 30 years.

Robert Reccord, president of the Southern Baptist Convention's North American Mission Board, notified Catholic officials of the decision with a letter in February.

The Associated Press reported the ending of the talks March 23.

"We're not ecumenists. We're evangelicals committed to sharing the gospel," Southern Baptist dialogue participant Phil Roberts explained in the AP story. Roberts, president of Midwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Kansas City, Mo., until recently handled interfaith relations at NAMB.

Reccord said the talks involving 16 scholars would end next year, after a final discussion and drafting of a report on Baptist and Catholic understandings of soteriology, the doctrine of how souls are saved. The group issued an earlier statement in 1999 noting similarities and differences in ways the two faith groups view the Bible.

While the SBC has historically avoided membership in ecumenical organizations like the National Council of Churches, conversations between Baptist and Catholic leaders have gone on since 1971, when the Home Mission Board took over talks started four years earlier by Wake Forest University.

The talks lapsed for several years in the 1980s after conservatives took over leadership of the SBC from moderates. The Baptist-Catholic conversation, one of 11 official dialogues conducted by the Catholic National Council of Bishops Secretariat for Ecumenical and Interreligious Affairs, reconvened in 1995. It has been criticized of late, however, by some Baptists who say ecumenical dialogue is inconsistent with the denomination's recent emphasis on doctrinal purity.

The current conversations began after the SBC in 1994 passed a resolution encouraging the Interfaith Witness Department of the Home Mission Board, which since has merged with other agencies to form NAMB, to "pursue ongoing Southern Baptist-Roman Catholic conversation while maintaining our Southern Baptist confession without compromise."

Over time, however, many Southern Baptists "became suspicious" of the Baptist-Catholic dialogue, Roberts told the AP.

A 1999 SBC resolution on Southern Baptists and ecumenism urged caution in such endeavors. It asked denominational boards and agencies to "maintain the historic position of Southern Baptists" as they cooperate with other groups in various enterprises and to avoid "any organizational or long-term relationship which would risk possible compromise of historic distinctives or the unique witness of Southern Baptists to the world."

Last summer, Louisiana pastor Jerry Moser made a motion at the SBC annual meeting asking the Executive Committee to study and make recommendations on expenditure of Cooperative Program funds with groups whose professed beliefs conflict with the "Baptist Faith and Message," the SBC's statement of faith.

The Executive Committee reported in February that its members "continue to review" reports filed earlier on the various SBC agencies' cooperative efforts with other denominations and faith groups.

Officials at NAMB amended their earlier report to the Executive Committee, reportedly after a trustee complained privately that the first version glossed over the agency's relationship with Mission America, an umbrella group in which NAMB participates in evangelism with non-Baptist groups such as Pentecostals.

Moser, a longtime critic of ecumenical entanglements, has also criticized the SBC's LifeWay Christian Resources publishing arm for promoting books by Charles Colson, a leading advocate of forging closer ties between evangelicals and Catholics.

Moser, pastor of Bayou DuLarge Baptist Church in Theriot, La., released a statement saying he and his church "are gratified to hear of this instance where SBC leaders are correcting an obvious inconsistency" with their professed biblical beliefs.

"The Roman Catholic Church has clearly defined such official 'conversations' and 'dialogues' to be steps in a process of ecumenical convergence and eventual visible unity," Moser said. "This is obviously contrary to the historic beliefs of Southern Baptists. Thus, even though we are confident that most Southern Baptist participants did not see these official conversations in this way, we believe that any actual or perceived official theological dialogue between SBC leaders and representatives of the Roman Catholic hierarchy is simply asking for misunderstanding."

Moser was fired as a mission pastor in 1995 after publicly confronting then Home Mission Board President Larry Lewis for endorsing with another SBC agency head a document titled "Evangelicals and Catholics Together: The Christian Mission in the Third Millennium" at an associational meeting.

Both Lewis and Richard Land, president of the SBC Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, subsequently had their signatures removed from the document, claiming it was widely misunderstood. They have refused, however, appeals by Moser that they "repent" of having participated in drafting of the document, which Moser says contains heresy.

Moser, whose congregation in south Louisiana's bayou country is composed mainly of former Catholics and Episcopalians, says he doesn't mind Southern Baptists working with those groups on social issues such as abortion or pornography, but he objects to theological talks which portray Catholics and Baptists as brothers in Christ.

Moser contends that Catholics and other groups that teach that salvation may be earned by observing the sacraments hold to "another gospel" than the message of salvation by grace through faith preached by Southern Baptists. Mingling too closely with such groups, he argues, undermines his and other churches' efforts "to respectfully share the one gospel of God's grace to our Catholic friends and family members and to work together with them in ways that may not be so easily used to compromise our beliefs."

Timothy George, dean of Beeson Divinity School in Birmingham, Ala., and a participant in the Baptist-Catholic conversations, told AP that a small faction of Baptists had "a strong and somewhat strident reaction to this." He admitted, however, that "ecumenism is not a high priority for most Southern Baptists."

Frank Ruff, a priest who serves as the National Conference of Catholic Bishops' liaison to the SBC, said he was saddened by news that the conversations would be ending.

"I'm confident that this whole movement toward Christian reconciliation is not something we dreamed up," Ruff said. "It's something that the Holy Spirit is breathing in the churches. One decision of one group to stop dialogue is not going to be the end of the work of the Spirit."

Reccord said in his letter that termination of the current talks "does not rule out the possibility of future meetings that might be undertaken."

But Baptist Press quoted Rudy Gonzalez, director of NAMB's interfaith evangelism team, as saying that any future conversations that might develop "will have to fit within the parameters of what the North American Mission Board has been charged to do, which is to assist Southern Baptist churches to evangelize North America."

The change comes at a time when other high-profile Southern Baptists have gained attention for statements critical of other faiths.

Albert Mohler, president of Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., said recently on CNN's Larry King Show: I believe the Roman Church is a false church and teaches a false gospel. ... Indeed, I believe the pope himself holds a false and unbiblical office."

The International Mission Board has defended the publishing of prayer guides for use in Southern Baptist churches that critics said were insensitive to Jews, Hindus and Muslims.

A leader of a Southern Baptist fellowship of "Messianic" believers recently announced the group was severing ties with the convention because of a public perception that Southern Baptists are intolerant of other faiths. Another leader, however, said the first didn't speak for all members of the Southern Baptist Messianic Fellowship, and that the group plans to reorganize this summer.

-30-

-- Mark Wingfield contributed to this story.

Christian Scientists qualify for federal funds, courts say

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- A Christian Science nursing facility that relies on prayer instead of conventional medicine for treatment can receive federal payments through Medicare and Medicaid, according to a ruling left standing by the United States Supreme Court April 2.

Without comment, the high court turned away an appeal that claimed the payments violate the constitutionally mandated separation of church and state.

Both the Medicare Act and Medicaid Act of 1965 originally made specific allowances for adherents of Christian Science religion, which, according to court documents, "objects to medical care and embraces prayer as the sole means of healing."

A U.S. district court ruled in 1996 that allowing the group to qualify for federal payments violated the First Amendment's ban on establishment of religion.

Congress responded by replacing "sect-specific" portions of the two laws with neutral language accommodating "any person who is relying on a religious method of healing and for whom the acceptance of the medical health services would be inconsistent with his or her religious beliefs."

The changes enabled individuals who hold religious objections to medical care to receive governmental assistance for care at "religious nonmedical health-care institutions."

The taxpayers' group Children's Healthcare is a Legal Duty Inc. that won the previous case against such payments sued again, but this time lost in the district court.

Ruling in favor of the Christian Scientists and several religious groups that filed friend-of-the court-briefs in support of the religious exemption, the 8th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals agreed the new arrangement is constitutional. Also filing in support of the Christian Scientists was Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., while many doctors and medical groups filed briefs in support of CHILD and against the Christian Scientists.

The 8th Circuit said the new legislative language was designed "to accommodate all persons who object to medical care for religious reasons, not only Christian Scientists."

The appeals court said the act was constitutional under the three-pronged "Lemon test" used previously in disputes over the establishment of religion. The court said the measure has a secular purpose, it neither advances nor inhibits religion and it does not create excessive entanglement between church and state.

The court said the law merely allows individuals "to be reimbursed for a subset of those services for which they would be reimbursed if they had sought treatment at a medical institution."

The taxpayers' suit had argued that, "Tens of millions of Medicare and Medicaid dollars have been paid by the federal government directly into the coffers of the Christian Science Church's sanatoria for the nonmedical care of its members by faith-healers."

CHILD is a nonprofit national membership organization established in 1983 to "protect children from abusive religious and cultural practices, especially religion-based medical neglect." In documents asking the Supreme Court to overturn the ruling, CHILD lawyers called the 8th Circuit decision "convoluted."

"This case requires reversal before the siren song of its reasoning spreads in this era of rapidly replicating government programs yielding aid to religious entities," lawyers for the group said. They pointed to the 1996 "charitable choice" law that invited religious groups into the competition for government welfare dollars.

Despite those arguments, the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear the case.

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How do pastors prepare for once-a-year Easter crowd?

By Trennis Henderson

LOUISVILLE, Ky. (ABP) --Easter is not only the holiest day of the Christian calendar. It also is the Sunday when many churches have their highest worship attendance of the year.

That means pastors typically have the opportunity to preach to some people who attend church only once or twice a year. How does that fact influence a pastor's Easter sermon preparation and presentation?

Some see it as a chance to share a clear evangelistic message with people who attend church infrequently. Others focus on a time of worship and reflection that can offer encouragement to everyone from mature Christians to one-time visitors.

Billy Compton, pastor of Severns Valley Baptist Church in Elizabethtown, Ky., said he views Easter as "a great opportunity to present the evidence of our Christian faith -- the hinge of what we believe."

Noting that the message of Easter offers listeners "hope, peace and life after death," he said he seeks to deliver a message "with simplicity and clarity and yet to do it in culturally relevant ways."

Rather than berating people who show up at church only on Easter, Compton added: "I see it as an opportunity to build a relationship that can bring them a little closer to a faith commitment. That's the pool of prospects God has given me to build a harvest field out of."

Walter Jackson, dean of the school of theology at Campbellsville University, noted that Easter "represents the most important event in the Christian year and in the Christian faith."

"Any pastor worth his salt would celebrate the opportunity to have a wider audience to proclaim to Christians the renewal of our faith and to proclaim to unbelievers the great benefits and joy of having Christ as Savior both here and for eternity."

Jackson said pastors can prepare for Easter through personal devotions and Bible study that focus on the themes of the death, burial and resurrection of Jesus Christ. He also encouraged pastors to "talk to some other Christians about what Easter means to them and what would be a meaningful ingredient of an Easter worship and message."

Preaching professor Hershael York said the unique mix of a typical Easter crowd "unquestionably should have an impact on the way a pastor prepares his message, because he should assume there are more lost people there than on any other Sunday. He ought to prepare to preach the gospel with lost people in mind and proclaim the gospel purposefully."

York, associate professor of Christian preaching at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., added, however: "The audience only changes the application side of the sermon. It never changes the meaning of the text. If it resonates in their hearts, it makes a difference."

Dan Garland noted that during his years as a pastor, he sought to deliver a simple gospel message focused on the Easter story, "knowing there were people there who came just because it was a fashionable thing to do."

Easter is a time when "people who come to church sporadically need to leave that day feeling like what they heard applied to their lives," said Garland, leader of the Kentucky Baptist Convention evangelism-growth team. "The message needs to center on Christ. The message of Easter basically is evangelistic. Make it a spiritual experience and a defining moment in people's lives."

-30-

Children common ministry need to all family types, researchers say

By Mark Wingfield

WACO, Texas (ABP) -- The presence of children in a home creates the most common challenge facing families of all types, according to the final summary of a national study of family life in religious congregations.

Blended families, single-parent families and traditional nuclear families all share a common challenge in dealing with issues of parenting, according to the Families in Congregations study by Diana Garland and Pam Yankeelov.

Garland, chairwoman of the School of Social Work at Baylor University, and Yankeelov, a professor of social work at the University of Louisville, completed the study with funding from the Lilly Endowment.

They interviewed 1,977 people in 32 U.S. congregations, including National Baptists, Presbyterians, Southern Baptists and United Methodists.

Meanwhile, the study also rebuts a common stereotype that single adults are mainly involved in congregations as a means of finding social interaction. "Single adults participate in a congregation not because they are just looking for a social gathering with other singles but because they want to grow and commit themselves to a life of faith," Garland said in an interview.

The national research project identified seven types of family structures commonly found in American congregations -- nuclear families, blended families, single seniors, empty-nest couples, married seniors with grown children, single-parent families and married couples with no children.

Given this array of family situations in most churches, "ministry with families in congregations needs to be sensitive and responsive to the diversity of families in which persons live and define themselves as family members," Garland and Yankeelov assert.

Across this broad spectrum, however, the challenge of child rearing is the most common link between family types.

"The fact that the greatest stressor in the lives of families is the presence of children and not the 'kind' of parents -- single or married or blending -- is really something," Garland noted. "Raising children is stressful, and parents of all kinds need the support and involvement of a caring community."

The research report adds: "It appears that the most significant challenge to the cohesion, companionship, ability to avoid conflict dominating the family's communication and adaptability of families is the presence of dependent children, whether the adults in the family are in a first marriage, second or later marriage or single.

"Thus, attempts to strengthen congregational families can emphasize that different kinds of families are indeed more alike than different. The challenges they face are more likely to be related to the developmental needs of child and adult members in interaction with one another and less to the varying structures of adult relationships."

The one significant exception to this finding is that blended families "tend to be less cohesive," Garland and Yankeelov note. "Trying to develop the same level of cohesion and commitment of family members in step-relationships with one another may be unrealistic and self-defeating."

The researchers also discovered that most church-going families believe they give greatest expression to their faith through family experiences rather than through private devotions.

"These families appear to be saying that the daily activities of family life are the canvass for experiencing and sharing their faith life with one another and that activities that call them as a family beyond their own boundaries are also significant," Garland and Yankeelov explain.

This finding should have significant impact on how congregations attempt to minister to families, they add.

"Most ministry activities of congregations have involved persons as individuals, not as families," the report says. "These families seem to be saying that these activities are important to them as families, but perhaps they are missing from their lives. The answer may be to emphasize more the ways families together can serve."

Brother's weight-loss success funds sister's overseas adoption

By Stacey Hamby

WARRENTON, Mo. (ABP) -- A Warrenton, Mo., woman's dream of adopting a child from overseas is coming true -- all because her brother decided to get in shape.

Randy Penberthy of Two Rivers Church in St. Charles, Mo., weighed 368 pounds in 1999. By following a strict diet and exercising six days a week, he dropped 174 pounds in 2000.

A program called "Body for Life" awarded him \$10,000 for his efforts. He, in turn, gave the money to his sister.

Bonnie Keen had long wanted to adopt a child from abroad. But she and her husband, Robert, pastor of Warrenton Christian Church, did not have the \$16,000 needed to adopt a Romanian child.

Penberthy said giving the money to his sister was the right thing to do.

"I spent time in prayer about what I should do with this money," he said. "I need a new roof, and I thought of all the things I could buy with it. But I balanced that up against being able to truly save a little girl's life and introducing her to Jesus Christ, and I knew what I needed to do."

Keen, who home schools her four children, got a surprise call from her brother on his way to work one day.

"I just started crying," she recalled. "I always knew God would provide, but I had no idea it would be through my brother losing weight and giving me his cash prize.

"I loved my brother before this, but this makes him pretty special around our house."

Even with the gift, the Keens were \$6,000 short of the amount needed to begin the adoption process. Then Two Rivers Church got involved.

Penberthy recalled, "One Sunday, the pastor showed a local news video clip about my story and told the congregation about my sister's desire to adopt, and he said people could give to her by placing an offering in our box at the back of the church.

"The next Sunday, he presented me with a check for \$6,000."

The Keens have completed the necessary paperwork for the adoption, and they hope to travel this year to Romania to bring home their daughter.

It all goes back to a weighty decision made by Penberthy more than a year ago.

On New Year's Eve 1999, Penberthy wasn't thinking about Y2K. His mind was on his struggling marriage. Despite praying that God would transform his marriage in 2000, he confessed, he didn't really believe that God would do so.

In February 2000, Randy and his wife, Vicki, attended a marriage retreat. That's when Penberthy made a commitment to lose weight.

"I got to thinking more and more about how God created me as a gift to my wife," Penberthy recalled. "I got to thinking about my weight, and I knew I had never taken care of that gift.

"I committed to get myself in the best physical and spiritual shape I could and present that as a gift to her."

From Jan. 30 to Nov. 26 last year, he lost 174 pounds using the Body for Life plan of nutritious eating and combining weightlifting with cardiovascular exercise. What made this plan different, Penberthy said, was the "six days on, one day off plan."

"I read the book, 'Body for Life,' and decided that about 90 percent of it was the same as the core of other nutrition books," he said. "But the part that appealed to me was eating 'whole' foods six days a week, and then on the seventh day, I could skip exercise and eat anything I want.

"You can make it through those six days knowing Sunday is coming."

Vicki -- who herself has lost 65 pounds -- said her husband's commitment to lose weight and spend time with God daily has transformed their marriage and family life.

"We have date day once a month where we spend the whole day together, and we have date night once a week," she said. "I am proud of my husband, and I hope his story might inspire other people. ... Once we put God first, everything else fell into place."

The Penberthys' day begins at 3:50 a.m. when they each rise to spend time alone with God. Then, they go to the gym to work out together before going to work. He is a technical manager and she teaches first grade at a Christian school.

"The fact that there's love between Vicki and I at the gym is so attractive to the world," he said. "We high-five and hug each other."

He said there are eight or nine families and singles they have met at the gym and shared Christ with who now attend their church regularly. And there are about 15 people from church who now work out regularly with the Penberthys at 5 a.m.

"God is allowing this transformation physically to enable me to share the gospel," Randy said.

"Not only do I keep my body in good shape now, but I also have to watch myself spiritually as well, because people are watching me. I Corinthians 9:24-27 really drives me so that I do not harm the platform God has given me."

Penberthy said the physical and spiritual renewal he has experienced over the past year has led to other changes, too.

"My confidence level has gone through the roof," he said. "As an obese person, there was always the humiliation factor -- not being able to sit in a booth at a restaurant or take off my shirt on a canoe trip. I was always trying to prove my worth because I felt so bad about how I looked.

"All that stuff is gone now. I have never in my life been able to shop in discount stores and buy a size 34 pants and 42 jacket.

"I see myself walking down the sidewalk and think, 'No way. That's not me.'"

Apparently, some relatives at a family reunion last year didn't think it was him, either.

"About 80 percent of my family saw me at the reunion and had no idea who I was. I had a lot of fun that day."

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