



Associated Baptist Press

Editor: Bob Allen
Executive editor: Greg Warner

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

April 24, 2001

SOUTHERN BAPTIST HISTORICAL
LIBRARY AND ARCHIVES
Nashville, Tennessee

MAY 01 2001

(01-32)

IN THIS ISSUE:

- Alliance urges Fellowship to reverse stance on gays
- Southeastern trustees adopt new SBC faith statement
- Trustees delete verse of seminary hymn
- Virginia Baptist policy permits affiliation by out-of-state churches
- Religious leaders seek end to military exercises near Puerto Rican island
- Supreme Court turns away appeal by anti-abortion group
- Culture, not Christianity, defines death, speaker says
- Unreasonable expectations burden family, scholar says
- Tragedy brings neighbors, Baptist churches together

Alliance urges Fellowship to reverse stance on gays

By Bob Allen

DECATUR, Ga. (ABP) -- The Alliance of Baptists is asking a sister Southern Baptist Convention splinter group, the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, to withdraw a recent statement on homosexuality.

Meeting at a church under fire for its pro-gay stance, the Washington-based Alliance, during its April 20-22 annual convocation, urged the CBF's Coordinating Council to rescind a new "organizational value" that forbids direct funding of groups that condone gay and lesbian relationships.

The value statement, to be used in developing the Fellowship's annual budget and in hiring of staff and missionaries, primarily affects divinity schools linked to universities that include sexual orientation in their open-admissions policies. Under the new rule, those schools aren't eligible for institutional support from the Atlanta-based Fellowship, but students who attend them may still qualify for scholarships.

The Alliance vote, however, stemmed from confusion about whether the new policy also applies to exhibitors at this summer's CBF General Assembly. A letter sent by a CBF representative to prospective exhibitors said they must "enhance and affirm the mission and shared commitments" of the Fellowship. Background documents included the value statement on homosexuality.

That prompted the Alliance's board of directors to decree the group should "have no official presence" at the June CBF meeting in Atlanta, in order to remain consistent with its "welcoming and affirming" stance toward gays and lesbians.

During a report of that action, however, Alliance member Mahan Siler of Franklinton, N.C., persuaded a majority of convocation participants to instead approve a statement expressing grief over the new CBF

statement. Siler's substitute motion further urged the Fellowship's Coordinating Council "to rescind this action and to develop ways to continue discernment of the church's response to homosexual persons in our day."

Speakers debating the motion asked Alliance Executive Director Stan Hastey to seek clarification of the CBF policy before deciding whether to exhibit at this year's General Assembly. Some, including Richard Groves of Winston-Salem, N.C., who introduced the original motion to Alliance directors, argued that having a presence at the General Assembly would imply that the Alliance agrees with the Fellowship's homosexuality statement.

"It's not a matter of wanting to distance ourselves [from the CBF]," Groves said. "I'm going to the CBF. A lot of us will. It's a matter of clarifying where we stand on this particular issue."

Others said the Alliance should ask specifically if the group is still welcome in the CBF exhibit hall in light of the new value statement. "I would rather be thrown out than to walk out," said Alan Neely of Raleigh, N.C.

Ken Sehested, executive director of the Baptist Peace Fellowship of North America, another gay-friendly organization, said CBF leaders took three months before finally granting his request to exhibit at the General Assembly. He said the Peace Fellowship is free to display any of its materials, including a controversial resource booklet for promoting dialogue about sexual orientation in churches.

"We are not censored in any way," Sehested said.

Sehested said he believes the time for conversation within the CBF over homosexuality "is riper than ever before" and urged the Alliance against taking any steps that might cut off such discussion.

CBF moderator Donna Forrester of Greenville, S.C., was present during the lengthy discussion but did not speak.

The Alliance formed in 1986 around principles that were at issue in the middle of a decade-long takeover of the Southern Baptist Convention by fundamentalists. The Alliance, which has since evolved into a haven for the denomination's most liberal wing, is today one of the few religious bodies in the United States with a stated position that is welcoming and affirming of gays.

The 10-year-old CBF, a larger and more centrist SBC-splinter group that emphasizes missions and church programs, describes its new stance on homosexuality as "welcoming but not affirming." Fellowship leaders say the organization doesn't exclude gays, but won't use mission gifts to fund causes that might offend contributing churches.

Both groups dissent from the 16 million-member Southern Baptist Convention, which has taken a hard line against homosexuality. Following suit with the national convention, the Georgia Baptist Convention two years ago withdrew fellowship from two Atlanta-area churches over the issue.

The Atlanta Baptist Association, meanwhile, recently refused to remove the same two churches, citing autonomy of the local church. That action prompted defunding of the association by both state and SBC entities and talk of a formal split within the association.

One of those churches, Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, Ga., was host for this year's Alliance meeting. During an announcement from the pulpit, Oakhurst Pastor Lanny Peters directed a comment to Tim Shirley, pastor of Atlanta's Virginia-Highland Baptist Church, the other targeted pro-gay congregation. "Tim, we have been together so many times the last two years, but we have never [before] been applauded," he quipped.

That reference was to the first of eight times the convocation audience interrupted Hastey's annual "State of the Alliance" address with applause. Hastey commended the two churches, both of which are Alliance members, "for the substance of the positions you have taken" and "the exemplary way in which you have borne witness to the truth."

"You are doing the work of the gospel," Hastey said, "and we give thanks to God for you."

Hastey said most of the 110-church Alliance's "admittedly modest growth" in recent years is among churches that have been ostracized over homosexuality. He recalled that several years ago, while deliberating whether to take sides on the issue, Alliance leaders felt they might be putting the organization's "life on the line."

"Maybe we were," he said. "Yet in the ongoing process of being such a welcoming body, we are coming to learn first-hand the truth of the gospel paradox that one finds life by losing it, not by trying to save it."

In the same report, Hasteley also called on churches in the Alliance, which from the beginning has supported the ordination of women, to be more intentional about hiring female ministers. "To put the matter bluntly, when it comes to the rightful role of women as pastors, the larger onus is on us," he said. "Why? Simply because, unlike the Southern Baptist overlords, we claim to be for women."

"Yet with rare exceptions," he continued, "even the most progressive congregations in the Alliance are not calling women as pastors. So women continue to hear the tinny sound of the all-too-common refrain: 'Our church is not ready yet.'"

Alliance president Paula Clayton-Dempsey echoed that theme in her sermon to the convocation. In a message titled "What Women Want," Clayton-Dempsey, a college chaplain from Mars Hill, N.C., referred to the male-written Gospel of Matthew's numbering of a crowd fed miraculously by Jesus at 5,000, "not counting the women and children."

"Women want to be counted," Clayton-Dempsey said. Women still are "not counted," she said, in a world where they are potential victims of spousal and sexual abuse and girls are four times as likely as boys to be malnourished. In America, she continued, women earn 75 percent as much as men for the same work and comprise 2 percent of top management. Women also aren't counted, she said, when they are called by God to preach but can't find a pulpit that welcomes them.

She added that the view that women don't count is now "officially written" in the Southern Baptist Convention's recently revised confessional statement, the "Baptist Faith and Message."

In other business, a recommendation to change the organization's name to Alliance of Baptists in the U.S.A. failed to receive a majority vote. Hasteley said the proposal would end confusion both at home and abroad between the organization and the Baptist World Alliance, a worldwide fellowship of Baptist unions also based in the Washington area.

Opponents to the change, however, said it sounded too nationalistic and might discourage churches from Canada from affiliating with the Alliance of Baptists.

The convocation also re-elected Clayton-Dempsey, a chaplain at Mars Hill College, to a second one-year term as president.

Other resolutions:

- Affirmed intention to develop an ecumenical partnership with the United Church of Christ. Alliance representatives will join a dialogue team that will develop a covenant for formal adoption in 2003.

- Asked President George W. Bush to review U.S. policy on Cuba.

- Urged debt relief and greater effort to fight AIDS in Zimbabwe.

- Stated solidarity with Southern and American Baptist churches that "have been ostracized, disfellowshipped or excluded" for welcoming members regardless of sexual orientation.

Southeastern trustees adopt new SBC faith statement

By Jimmy Allen

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- New faculty at Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary in Wake Forest, N.C., must agree with the 2000 version of the "Baptist Faith and Message," but current professors don't have to sign the document.

Trustees voted 23-1 on April 9 to require new faculty to sign the statement of faith that was adopted by the Southern Baptist Convention last June. Conservatives hail the new faith statement as more closely representing Southern Baptists of today, while moderates criticize it for de-emphasizing the priesthood of each believer and limiting the pastorate to men only.

"We felt it was important to send a message of cooperation and support to the Southern Baptist Convention," said Cecil Taylor, a trustee from Satsuma, Ala., who chairs the instruction committee.

Trustees began studying the idea of adopting the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" last fall. That was after a motion at last year's SBC annual meeting asking that the denomination not require employees to sign the faith statement was referred to all SBC boards of trustees.

Taylor said the instruction committee struggled over whether to recommend the "Baptist Faith and Message" become the school's official stance or to retain the Abstract of Principles, which has guided the seminary since its founding in 1951. The committee decided to do both. By keeping the Abstract of Principles, the seminary is "true to the school's history," Taylor said.

Trustee Charlie Waller was the lone voter against the proposal to have both documents.

"In my mind we're committing institutional schizophrenia," said Waller, a Southeastern graduate who now lives in Jeffersonton, Va.

The two faith statements are similar and requiring faculty to sign both would be like a group having two mission statements, said Waller, who noted he doesn't oppose the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message."

"Our institution does not need a new confessional statement," Waller said. He said the "problem" in the seminary's past has been with faculty not honestly fulfilling the statement, rather than the statement itself.

Former President Randall Lolley, who led the seminary from 1974 to 1988, said he didn't want to comment about Waller's description of that era's faculty. He did say he was saddened to learn the trustees had adopted the "Baptist Faith and Message" as a "creed."

A trustee at the seminary from 1978 to 1988, however, did challenge Waller's comment about some previous faculty members not fulfilling the Abstract of Principles. Harold Stinson of Winston-Salem, N.C., said he often visited classes while a trustee. "I never saw anything that wasn't on the up and up," Stinson said.

Russ Bush, academic vice president and dean of the faculty, said Waller is right in that if a person with integrity signs the Abstract of Principles, then the seminary shouldn't have a problem. But he said the differences between the two faith statements are minor and having both allows the seminary to keep its roots while affirming where the convention is today.

Although the vote does not require present faculty to sign the "Baptist Faith and Message," Bush said they would be invited to sign it voluntarily during Awards Day at the seminary at the end of the semester.

He predicted that no more than one instructor would choose not to sign the statement. Bush described the unnamed professor as the most senior faculty member who will retire in a couple years. George Braswell is the last remaining faculty member who served prior to the conservative takeover of trustees in 1987. He is distinguished professor of missions and world religions and director of the doctor-of-ministry program.

In other items, trustees:

-- Approved a \$16.8 million budget for the fiscal year beginning Aug. 1. The budget is a \$2 million or 11.9 percent increase. Trustee Kent Humphreys of Oklahoma City asked how the Baptist General Convention of Texas' decision to withdraw funding from the seminary has affected the budget.

Ryan Hutchinson, vice president for administration, said giving through the Cooperative Program to the SBC has increased over the same time last year. If a drastic effect is noticed later, then a contingency plan will be presented to trustees at their fall meeting, he said.

-- Heard that the seminary raised \$3.3 million over the past six months. Trustee Jimmy Jacumin of Icard, N.C., said that amount is higher than any previous 12-month period.

-- Considered the creation of an off-campus master's degree program. Patterson said the school is getting pressure to offer a degree program off campus. Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky., does it, and churches where Southeastern has extension sites want it, he said.

-- Agreed to spend two-thirds of the \$300,000 cost for a new computer system on the campus. When the seminary sells property on U.S. 1 for a shopping center, the balance of \$100,000 will be made available so the system can be installed before the fall semester. Hutchinson said the sale of land should be completed by June 30.

The sale is contingent on the approval of a site plan by the Town of Wake Forest. The town board, which previously denied shopping center requests for the property, will vote May 15. The present town board is a "completely different town council" in that it is supportive of economic development, Hutchinson said.

-- Promoted Dorothy Patterson from an assistant professor to professor of women's studies. Trustee Dwight Smith of Florence, Miss., proposed the idea.

"She's been around a long time. I think that's the right thing to do," said Smith, meeting the last time with trustees before rotating off the board.

Bush was asked how other faculty members would react, considering the promotion would be handled differently than others. The academic dean said he sees no problem. "Everybody loves her," Bush said.

Dorothy Patterson is the wife of the seminary president and doesn't accept pay for teaching.

-- Heard the president say the student body numbers 2,129, a growth rate of about 2 percent, Patterson said. That number includes the number of people who have taken classes during the school year. The actual number of full-time-equivalent students for the seminary and college is 1,685, he said.

-- Heard Coy Privette, trustee chair from Kannapolis, N.C., characterize the change that has occurred at Southeastern since conservatives gained a majority of trustees in 1987. Although the student enrollment dropped during the years of conservative president Lewis Drummond (1988-1992), the enrollment has increased from 703 to more than 2,000 during the past decade under Patterson, he said.

In addition, 100 teams the past five years have been sent to parts of the world unreached with the gospel message. And 97 percent of those have since become International Mission Board appointees. Despite those numbers, "We've got a lot of adversaries," Privette said. "In North Carolina, not all appreciate us."

Privette said his response to people who are displeased with the conservative surge at Southeastern is to invite them to a chapel service on the campus. "You're going to be absolutely amazed at what you're going to see," he said.

-- Heard Patterson tell a story about chapel services. About three years ago, chapel attendance began to lag so the president decided to visit dorms during chapel.

During his rounds, he found some who had just taken a shower and a couple others playing table tennis. Patterson said he "took chapel to them" by reading Scripture to them.

"I never had so much fun in my life," Patterson said.

About the same time, Patterson wrote a strongly worded letter to students implying that he would make chapel mandatory if more didn't start attending the services, held Tuesdays, Wednesdays and Thursdays.

Trustees delete verse of seminary hymn

By Jimmy Allen

WAKE FOREST, N.C. (ABP) -- Trustees of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary voted to delete a verse from the seminary's official hymn, citing political connotations.

A verse touting freedom added to the hymn in 1987 was used as a rallying cry for moderates who before then had dominated the seminary's board of trustees and faculty, said Russ Bush, academic vice president and dean at the school in Wake Forest, N.C.

"It was simply put in as a political statement," Bush said.

An author of the verse added to six original stanzas written by Edward McDowell, an early New Testament professor at Southeastern, however, said he disagrees with Bush's assessment.

"It was an expression of our Christian and Baptist beliefs, which we felt were consistent with Dr. McDowell's work in the other stanzas of the hymn," said Bob Mullinax, a 1957 graduate of the seminary. "Of course, I'm disappointed to hear about this action, and, of course, I'm not surprised."

Mullinax co-wrote the verse with Randall Lolley, who at the time was president of Southeastern. He resigned in 1987, stating he could not work with Southeastern's majority of conservative trustees.

Lolley declined to comment on the verse's removal.

The verse written by Mullinax and Lolley was inserted as the fifth of seven verses. During the seminary's 50th anniversary celebration last fall, the hymn was sung in three separate parts of two verses each. The verse written by Mullinax and Lolley wasn't sung.

The hymn was written to the tune of "Where Cross the Crowded Ways of Life." The deleted verse proclaims:

"For freedom Christ has set us free,
Breaking the chains of captivity.
Bound but to God we go forth whole,
Free from the shackles of mind and soul."

-30-

Virginia Baptist policy permits affiliation by out-of-state churches

By Robert Dilday

RICHMOND, Va. (ABP) -- The Baptist General Association of Virginia's 1,471 congregations may find themselves joined by churches in other states following clarification of an affiliation policy by the BGAV's policy-making body.

A statement on affiliation, adopted by the Virginia Baptist Mission Board at the request of its executive committee, was in response to a handful of churches outside of Virginia who have asked about affiliation with the BGAV, said Reginald McDonough, the BGAV's executive director.

"We have had inquiries from churches in other states: 'Would we be welcome in the BGAV?'" McDonough told members of the mission board during their regular spring meeting, April 3-4 in Richmond.

McDonough said nothing in the BGAV constitution prohibits affiliation by churches from out of state. In fact, a few congregations just across state lines in North Carolina and West Virginia have been active members for decades. McDonough declined to say from where the recent inquiries have come, but he indicated they were not states bordering Virginia.

Despite the historic presence of a few out-of-state churches in the BGAV, "our focus has always been on [ministry in] Virginia," said McDonough. He said clarification of the affiliation policy was needed because, "We really don't have a procedure for bringing in churches beyond our borders."

McDonough did not say what motivated the requesting churches to seek BGAV membership. However, the statement adopted by the board describes the inquiring churches as "exploring affiliation by affinity rather than affiliation by geography." Many state Baptist conventions have followed the national Southern Baptist Convention in its shift to the theological right, to the dismay of moderate churches in those states. Some of those congregations likely feel more compatible with the BGAV's moderate theological environment.

The affiliation statement, which would be given to any church requesting BGAV membership, cites current financial requirements for membership and lists the BGAV's statement of vision and values, as well as resolutions on theological and social issues adopted by the association during the past 10 years.

It also includes several "parameters and expectations" of out-of-state churches seeking affiliation.

"There may be some churches that aren't a fit for us or us for them," said first vice president Reggie Warren, who presented the statement to the mission board. "We wanted to establish a covenant so they would join us with their eyes wide open."

The statement urges out-of-state affiliated churches to:

- Relate and minister "in a fashion that is supportive of the purpose, vision, values and positions" of the BGAV.

- Send messengers to the BGAV annual meeting.

- Contribute to the cooperative missions budget of the BGAV "through a giving plan of their design consistent with the giving policies of the General Association."

- Utilize the resources of the Virginia Baptist Mission Board and participate in equipping events sponsored by the board in Virginia and on-line. The statement notes that on-site consultation services may not be "practicable."

- Participate in Virginia Baptist partnership mission projects.

McDonough stressed that the BGAV will not solicit membership from churches but only will respond to requests from congregations.

"We do not intend to enlist churches in other states," he said. "The initiative will be on the church's side." The statement indicates that the final decision in any affiliation request will be determined by the mission board.

Religious leaders seek end to military exercises near Puerto Rican island

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- Eleven religious leaders have asked President George W. Bush to order an end to U.S. military exercises on the island of Vieques, Puerto Rico.

An April 18 letter welcomed news that the U.S. Navy was suspending bombing exercises on Vieques in March. The leaders said they hoped the move would signal "the end of the 60-year U.S. military presence on Vieques."

Even before all the religious leaders had signed on to the statement, however, the Navy announced it would resume the exercises as early as April 27.

The religious leaders told Bush they were writing on behalf of Pro Vieques, a coalition of Catholic, Protestant and Pentecostal church leaders in Puerto Rico. They asked Bush to meet with the coalition.

"The majority of the people of Puerto Rico have demonstrated that they do not want Vieques to be a site for war exercises," the letter stated. It said Puerto Rico's religious leaders send a unanimous message: "Not one more bomb in Vieques."

"Their position is based in their strong faith in God and their love of their people," the letter said. "Like any good shepherd, their actions have been taken on behalf of the health and welfare of their flock."

Many of the religious leaders who signed the letter to Bush have visited Vieques to show their support for ending U.S. military exercises there. Bob Edgar, general secretary of National Council of Churches, led a six-member delegation to Vieques last June. That group carried a request from Puerto Rican church leaders for a meeting with President Clinton. But the requested meeting never took place.

Other signers of the interfaith letter included: Stan Hastey, executive director of the Alliance of Baptists; Michael E. Livingston, executive director of International Council of Community Churches; Robert Roberts, interim general secretary for American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.; and John Thomas, general minister and president of the United Church of Christ.

-30-

Supreme Court turns away appeal by anti-abortion group

By Kenny Byrd

WASHINGTON (ABP) -- The Supreme Court, without comment, declined April 16 to hear the appeal of New Jersey anti-abortion protesters challenging a federal law that guards access to clinics where abortions are performed.

The protestors argued that Congress overstepped its authority to regulate interstate commerce when it enacted the 1994 Freedom of Access to Clinic Entrances Act. The law bans the use of force, threats or blockades to interfere with access to reproductive health care, including abortions.

The New Jersey case involved three anti-abortion blockades during 1996 and 1997 outside a health clinic in Englewood, N.J. Police removed the protesters, and the federal government later sued people who participated in the protest.

A federal judge barred protesters from blocking access to the clinic and ordered them to pay \$15,000 in damages.

The 3rd U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the ruling, saying the clinic-access law was needed because a "national movement" of blockades had created a shortage of reproductive services.

-30-

Culture, not Christianity, defines death, speaker says

By Marv Knox

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- The American obsession with avoiding death robs Christians of the ability to accept death as God intended it, theologian Stanley Hauerwas told a Hardin-Simmons University audience.

Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School, delivered the first T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Lectures at HSU's Logsdon School of Theology in Abilene, Texas, April 9-10.

Maston was an ethics professor at Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth for more than 40 years. He was a Baptist leader in biblical ethics and such applications of ethics as race relations, family life, the Christian and vocation, church and state, and character formation.

The Logsdon School created the T.B. Maston Chair of Christian Ethics in the late 1990s. It is held by veteran Baptist ethicist Bill Tillman.

In two lectures -- on death and on family -- Hauerwas explored how American cultural ideals separate Christians from historic Christian understandings of church as community.

Americans want to avoid death to the degree that death-deferral has become the principle focus of medicine, Hauerwas said.

Hauerwas frequently asks people how they want to die. "They say they want to die in their sleep, quickly and painlessly, and they don't want to be a 'burden,' which means they no longer trust their children," he continued.

The preference for sudden death has not been the norm in Christian history, he said. "Medieval people feared what we want -- sudden death. They didn't so much fear death as they feared God" and hoped for time to prepare to die.

Ironically, two causes of death that are anathema to Americans today -- cancer and war -- would have been preferred by medieval Christians, because both would have given them time to reconcile with God.

Hauerwas said Americans today are guilty of "the medicalization of death."

"We go to physicians to be cured, not to be cared for," he noted. "In the past, doctors did not treat illnesses; they treated patients."

But now, money spent on crisis-care medicine equals 14 percent to 16 percent of the U.S. gross national product, and 12 percent of that amount is spent on people in the last year of their lives, he said.

Consequently, medicine has become a religion of the people, he observed, citing the disparity between emphasis on trained physicians and ministers.

"No one believes an inadequately trained minister will harm their salvation," he illustrated. "But they believe an inadequately trained physician will harm their health.

"Look at it that way, and you see where their church is. They believe medicine will cure them."

Hauerwas expressed appreciation for physicians and their commitment to treating illness, but he said their limitations are flagrant. "Most doctors only teach you how to get on with an illness you're not going to get over."

He said Americans, and Christian Americans in particular, are limited by their focus on avoiding death.

"The problem is we don't know how to die. Our culture denies death," he said. "Dying requires training, and we have a dearth of examples. Now, you've got to keep yourself alive. To what point?"

For all his faults, "suicide doctor" Jack Kevorkian gives seriously ill people permission to die, Hauerwas observed.

"We can only die today when a physician gives us permission to die -- when the doctor says there is nothing more to do," he said, adding, "Ministers can give permission to die."

He said Christians ought to view death differently than popular culture.

"I do not propose that we can die more easily because we are Christian and expect an afterlife," he said. "We Christians rob ourselves with sentimentality about death and afterlife."

"To suggest 'hope for the future' as a reason for accepting death makes about as much sense as having children because they are our 'hope for the future,'" he continued. He called such self-serving wishing sinful. "Only God is our hope for the future."

Rather than avoidance of death, "Christianity is ongoing training to die early," Hauerwas insisted. "Christians are sent into the world to stare death down -- to say, 'You are not our Lord.'"

That makes Christians susceptible to martyrdom, but it does not mean Christians should want to die, he said. Early Christian martyrs, he noted, did not "too readily seek death," because they didn't want their persecutors to bear the sin of killing them.

Christians' deaths should point beyond issues related to the end of their physical lives, Hauerwas declared.

"Christians' deaths should be commensurate with their lives," caught up in "the hope of the communion of the saints" expressed in earthly life in the community of the church.

"Christians live to one another because we are obligated to live in communion with one another," he said. "What is important is not whether the illness is unto death but whether the life points to the goodness of God, for the upbuilding of the community" of the church.

Just as they give the living of their lives, Christians should give their suffering and death to the church to build community through the shared experience, he said.

"Notice how seldom we preach, even at funerals, about death," he recalled. "When was the last time a minister told you you are dying, told you to prepare for death?"

"People approach death with no way to understand how to experience it."

But the community of Christian friends who can be with a person who is dying can dispel ultimate loneliness, he said.

"It is very important for friends to be with us as we die," he said. "We need the bodily presence God has given us in the life and death of his Son (today manifest in the 'body of Christ,' the church). This presence of God in Christ is with us; we are not alone.

"Christian friends do not give one another hope; they are hope."

And that hope is sufficient, he added. "The devil wants us to look on death and be lonely. We gaze on death and see Christ, for whom we are created."

Unreasonable expectations burden family, scholar says

By Marv Knox

ABILENE, Texas (ABP) -- The Christian family is buckling under the weight of unreasonable expectations, theologian Stanley Hauerwas said during Hardin-Simmons University's first T.B. Maston Christian Ethics Lectures.

Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School, delivered the lectures at HSU's Logsdon School of Theology April 9-10.

"The strength of the family historically has been its social, economic and political function," Hauerwas said. In close-knit agricultural communities, families provided social infrastructure, worked together to make members financially secure and wielded political clout, he explained.

In today's commercial society, however, "the family is the 'accident' of the worker, not his essence" and an economic liability in a profit-and-loss business environment, he observed. "The family now is economically and politically secondary."

He said the family's ability to provide deep relationships, particularly as people move often and do not enjoy deep relational commitments in the communities where they live, is both a strength and weakness.

"The family provides the one place for relations we have not chosen, but the family is unable to bear such psychological, moral burdens," he said. "The family is our hedge against loneliness, and that's too much pressure."

Hauerwas said that while Christianity is popularly portrayed as being family friendly, that is not always the case and specifically is not supported by the Bible.

"Some say Christianity is very good for the family," he explained. "You know, 'The family that prays together stays together.'"

But faithful observance of Christianity poses a threat to the romanticized view of the family held by many Americans, he said.

To illustrate, he told about letters written to his colleague, William Willimon, dean of the chapel at Duke University. Willimon has received several letters like one that claimed, "You ruined my daughter's life" because a profound Christian experience led her to become a missionary rather than an attorney.

"The Christian challenge goes deeper than expectations between parents and children," he said.

Hauerwas challenged other family expectations often held by Christians.

Rather than seeing singleness as failure to find a mate and fulfillment in family, Hauerwas said Christians should understand that singleness "embodies the hope that God's presence has come, is present and is to come." Individuals should be able to find relational fulfillment through the church, he said, and not exclusively in marriage.

"Christian justification of family may be more that Christians no longer believe in the efficacy of Christianity," he charged, noting many Christians feel pressed to have children to perpetuate the faith. "God could call every believer to singleness and yet God would renew his church in each generation."

Still, Hauerwas stressed he was not trying to denigrate marriage but rather to dignify it.

"Marriage is possible for Christians because we first have been loved by God," he said. But the extreme focus on finding intimacy and fulfillment in wedlock "overburdens marriage," he said.

The emphasis should be placed in the opposite direction -- first finding relationship, intimacy and fulfillment through the community of the church and then living in marriage if God leads.

"Baptism makes marriage possible," he claimed. "You need a community to hold you accountable when you promised lifelong monogamous fidelity. Church is the place to hold you to the promise."

Churches should establish at least two criteria for performing weddings, he suggested. First, both the man and woman should have been members of the church for at least a year. And second, they should be involved in a discipling process by mature Christians who have "survived" many of life's challenges.

Christian families also need to give up the possessive notion of parenthood, Hauerwas added.

"Christians, single or married, are parents" to the children in the church, he said. "Everyone in the community is to fulfill the responsibility to care for children. This is not restricted just to those who have children.

"There is no more important responsibility than to raise up children in the nurture and admonition of the Lord. Parenting is an office of the church, a responsibility. Children are not ours; they are the Lord's. Christian parents do not own children. Children of our bodies are gifts of the Lord, not our own possessions."

Hauerwas described his wish that his son -- now grown and a father himself, living in another state -- would find the kind of close parent-child relationship with a mature man in his church that he had with an older colleague, Stuart, years ago. "I pray for my son to find a 'parent' for him like Stuart," he said. "I don't feel displaced. That's the way the church works."

Ultimately, family life should reflect a relationship with God, he said.

"Marriage and family provide an opportunity to be for others what God has been for us."

-30-

Tragedy brings neighbors, Baptist churches together

By George Henson

BRYAN, Texas (ABP) -- The Greens and the Gastons lived on the same stretch of Texas road more than 27 years but never met. A tragedy that brought them together has created a new friendship, however, while uniting members of two Baptist churches that don't see eye-to-eye politically.

Louis and Kay Gaston drove by the home of Oris and Irma Green every day but never knew who lived there. That changed one February day when Gaston saw that the Greens' home had burned to the ground.

The Gastons learned more about the fire by watching the local news that night, and that's when their life began to change.

"I told Kay, 'We've got to find a way to do something for those people,'" Gaston recalled. "Preachers are always saying, 'Listen, and God will speak to you.' Well, I'm not sure God had ever spoken to me, but I know he spoke to me about this."

Gaston went to the Greens' burned-out home and found a note on the door.

It said the Red Cross had put them up in a hotel and gave the room number. The note ended with the words "We're OK." Gaston called the hotel and spoke to Irma Green as she rested from a day's work as a door checker at Wal-Mart in Bryan, Texas.

She picks up the story from there: "The phone rang, and this man said, 'I'm Louis Gaston, and I want to build you a house.' I didn't know what to say."

"I thought she'd hung up," Gaston joked.

The two neighbors who never had met agreed to get together and discuss the proposal. But even before they met, the phone call brought a sense of hope to the Greens.

"I felt like I was that man on the wayside who had been beaten up and left for dead on the side of the road," she explained. "Then this Good Samaritan, Mr. Gaston, came and picked me up and took me and said, 'You're going to be taken care of, and I'll take care of the bill.'"

The Greens are no strangers to life's ditches. Their 16-year-old son was killed by a hit-and-run driver as he walked to school a few years ago.

Oris Green stepped on a nail and contracted gangrene. His leg had to be amputated just above the knee.

His kidneys have deteriorated to the point he must undergo dialysis three days a week. And after their house burned, the couple combed the smoldering remains and pulled what they could salvage into the front yard. When they returned the next day, it all had been stolen.

When Irma Green met her Good Samaritan, he told her he wasn't sure what had motivated his calling her.

"He said, 'I don't know why I'm doing this,' but I thought, 'I do -- because he was inspired by God,'" she said. "He may not have known it, but he was inspired by God."

She said many people doubt her story. "People will just walk up to me and ask, 'How much is he really charging you?' People just can't believe it; they can't believe anybody could be so nice."

Gaston is quick to point out that this isn't a one-man show. More than two dozen men have donated their time and talents to constructing the house they hope to have completed by Mother's Day.

Most of those volunteers have come from two Baptist churches in Bryan -- Central Baptist, where the Gastons are members, and First Baptist.

Both are large, well-known churches in the area. But the two churches have taken opposite paths in the recent years of Baptist controversy.

Central Baptist Church left the Baptist General Convention of Texas to uniquely align with the new Southern Baptists of Texas Convention. First Baptist Church is strongly supportive of the BGCT.

Those differences haven't even been discussed among the volunteer builders, however.

"These are just people who want to do the things Jesus would have us to do," Gaston said. "Nothing else really enters in to it." Labor has been donated by electricians, plumbers, framers and bricklayers -- as well as by other individuals who just want to help.

So far, \$40,000 has been donated to purchase building materials, but Gaston believes even more will be needed.

"I mentioned to Don Rice, one of the other men who has had a really big part in this, that I was afraid we might not have enough money," Gaston explained. "Don said, 'If we start running out of money, we'll just start praying again, or have a fund raiser or whatever it takes.'"

The group begins each workday in prayer, and Gaston believes God's hand has been obvious every day.

One day after a period of rain, trucks bringing concrete had made the path to the job site such a quagmire that the truck carrying lumber couldn't get close.

"Just then this guy said, 'I'm building a swimming pool a couple of miles from here, and I was wondering if you guys could use some dirt.' He brought us 12 dump-truck loads of dirt, and then the lumber truck could get to where we needed it. That made our day," Gaston said.

Another day the air compressor quit working, halting progress on the framing of the home.

"Don Rice said, 'We forgot to pray this morning before we started; maybe we ought to do that now.' Well, we started praying and before we could finish it just started running again all on its own," Gaston said. "Every day we can just see that God's a part of this."

The experience has been so rewarding that the men involved already are looking for another project. "This has kind of been a wakeup call to this community, and when you see these men out here working, they're just so happy to be doing it," Gaston said.

And no one is happier than the Greens and the Gastons.

"We lived on this same stretch of road for 27 years and never knew one another, and now we're going to be friends for life," Gaston said. "Oris tells me all the time, 'When you get this finished, you're going to come over and we're going to have dinner and sit on that back porch.' And we're going to do it too," Gaston said.

-30-

END
