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**American Baptists elect
33-year-old president**

By Kenny Byrd

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (ABP) -- In a national meeting held every other year, American Baptists elected their youngest president ever and adopted a statement urging "restorative justice" alternatives to jailing criminals.

The 1.5 million-member American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. describes itself as the nation's most racially diverse religious denomination. Spokesman Richard Schramm said within the next couple of years -- if not already -- there would be no majority race in ABC membership.

Nearly 5,000 delegates met June 21-25 in historic Providence, R.I., where Roger Williams began America's first Baptist church in 1639. It marked the denomination's largest gathering in recent history, in part because it was held over a weekend.

David Hunt of Portland, Ore., the current vice president of ABC, was uncontested in an election for president. At 33, he is thought to be the ABC's youngest president. Hunt is a member of Grace Baptist Church in Portland and worked in the Rochester, N.Y., office of U.S. Rep. Louise Slaughter, D-N.Y.

Delegates overwhelmingly approved four "statements of concern" -- as the group calls its resolutions - - on a variety of issues.

One called on American Baptists to become more aware of and work toward implementing "restorative justice" in their communities.

Restorative justice is being touted in many areas as an alternative to a current criminal-justice system that relies solely on incarceration. It includes programs such as mediation between offenders and victims. The Baptist statement called the approach "biblically based."

"Retributive justice, by design, is simply unable to respond to the human dynamics in individual crimes, in part because the focus is on the breaking of the laws of the state, instead of the relationships between the victim and the offender," it said in part.

In other statements, delegates called on ABC youth to "set a Christ-like example for their peers, both in the ways they act and react in the face of violence." It called on ABC churches and pastors to address the issue of school violence.

Two other statements focused on ABC issues, including one to support the new church-planting effort

and another to address the handling of conflict within ABC life.

"Our handling of conflict has too often resulted in estrangement that hinders our common mission," read the conflict statement. It urged the support of church autonomy and urged American Baptists "to strive to maintain unity ... in spite of our disagreements, differences and conflicts."

A fifth proposed statement which listed concerns about President Bush's faith-based initiative won approval by a majority of delegates on the meeting's final day, but it failed because there was not a quorum at the time of the vote.

Among concerns cited in the proposed statement were potential "conflicts between religious liberty and civil rights that government funding of churches and other houses of worship may cause."

Hunt, the newly elected president, succeeds Trinette McCray, who was the first African-American clergywoman in the post. His term begins in January.

McCray addressed the delegates on the first night of business, June 22. "If we live a Christian life, we are called to the risk of exposure," she said.

She noted the "great cloud of witness" from Roger Williams to Martin Luther King Jr., who risked exposure for religious freedom and civil rights. "We cannot sit safely on the spectator's side," she said. "Our heritage calls us out. Our ancestors call us out. ... God calls us out."

Hunt said in an interview that a major struggle in coming years will be to streamline some of ABC's denominational structure so ministries will duplicate less and collaborate more. He also said ABC will have to look at how better to relate to churches in what is being called a post-denominational age.

Hunt said a more effective denominational structure would help whoever is elected to fill the role of general secretary, vacated by Dan Weiss who retired last year. A nominating committee is expected to nominate a replacement as early as November when ABC's General Board next meets.

Robert Roberts has been serving as interim general secretary since September. He is the past associate general secretary for ABC's World Mission Support.

Hunt also touted ABC's New Life 2010 campaign, which was launched in 2000 with the goal of planting 1,010 new churches and winning 1,000,010 "new believers" by the year 2010. Hunt said the campaign hopes to also revitalize existing churches and ministries.

Hunt dismissed a reporter's suggestion that ABC might seek to draw disenchanting Southern Baptist Convention churches into the fold. "I frankly don't think we need to spend a lot of time trying to recruit them," he said. "Our central focus should be being as focused and effective in ministry as we can be, and those other issues will take care of themselves."

"I think we need to make it clear first who we are -- the most racially and ethnically diverse religious denomination in the United States," Hunt said. "And second -- that we're actively pursuing the mission to which God is calling us." He said some disaffected churches that are looking for a denominational home "may well be attracted by that."

ABC also awarded two well-known Baptists for their efforts to promote peace with the distinguished 2001 Edwin T. Dahlberg Peace Award. The award went to Gordon Bennett, an educator and longtime peace advocate, and former Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., a member of First Baptist Church in Portland.

The award noted Gordon's decades of service and personal involvement in civil disobedience in promoting peace through nuclear disarmament and other means. Hatfield was cited for his work promoting nuclear-free zones and his efforts to end apartheid in South Africa.

Hunt also addressed some of the controversy that has erupted in recent years sparked by some ABC regions dismissing churches over homosexuality. Groups such as the Coalition for Baptist Principles have charged that a few regions have violated "covenants" with churches in their efforts to dismiss churches that are welcoming and affirming of gays.

"Too often I think we've gotten into name calling and letter writing and talking past each other rather than to each other," Hunt said. "I don't think it's appropriate to dis-fellowship churches over theological

differences."

Hunt pointed to the new younger leadership and ABC's continuing diversity as reasons to be excited about the denomination's future.

"We are really living out our diversity, and I think we are much the stronger for that. I don't think our diversity is an accident. I wholly believe that our diversity is a God-given gift that we need to use."

ABC delegates will next convene in Richmond, Va., in 2003.

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Cultural Christianity is dead, author tells American Baptists

By Kenny Byrd

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (ABP) -- Churches must adapt to a culture no longer built on Christianity or die, an Episcopalian bishop and author told a recent gathering of Baptists.

Instead of limiting itself to the vision of past heritage, the Christian church "needs to be focused on the present and what lies before us," said Claude Payne, bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Texas.

Payne's book, "Reclaiming the Great Commission: A Practical Model for Transforming Denominations and Congregations," is the inspiration for strategies in American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A.'s, New Life 2010 evangelism effort.

Payne's vision is to restore the missionary power of first-century Christianity to denominations and congregations in the 21st century.

Speaking at a luncheon meeting of ABC National Ministries, Payne described his own process of confronting what he describes as the death of the culture of the institutional church.

"In my own denomination, the church was sick, and we didn't realize it," he said.

Payne said the Christian faith is not dying, nor is the power of the Holy Spirit. "What is dying is cultural Christianity," he said. "The Christian faith no longer undergirds contemporary society. In fact, society is increasingly hostile to us."

Advising how churches should respond, he quipped, "Before the horse dies, dismount."

Payne said the Episcopal Church in Texas has found success in refocusing its efforts on serving the local congregation. New terminology describes the Church as "a community of miraculous expectations" and congregations as "missionary outposts." The new design proposes unity with "spiritual" rather than "institutional" roots.

"It communicates who we are in terms of our spiritual resources to congregations," he said.

Payne warned Baptists of a roadblock his faith group encountered about three years into their new effort. "In order for growth to occur," he said, "you first must get well. This is extremely difficult to do when your people don't know your entire culture is dying."

He said the healing process will create an enormous amount of stress, and added, "Getting well is not an overnight process."

Payne encouraged ABC members as they seek to reach a million new believers and begin 1,010 new churches. "Leadership and vision are the two building blocks," he said. "When you have vision, the faithful respond."

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Jailing criminals not solving crime, author tells Baptists

By Kenny Byrd

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (ABP) -- High incarceration rates have failed to decrease crime in the United States or address justice for victims, says Marc Mauer, author of "Race to Incarcerate."

Mauer spoke to a group at an auxiliary meeting of American Baptist Churches in the U.S.A. recent biennial meeting in Providence, R.I.

Mauer said the growing use of prisons in recent U.S. history "has all the hallmarks of a social experiment in crime control."

That experiment has failed, he said, noting that 2 million Americans are now behind bars. Two-thirds of those taking up cells are African Americans and Latinos. Last year, the United States passed Russia to become the world's leader in prison use.

Mauer is assistant director of The Sentencing Project and is a member of the American Bar Association's Committee on Race and the Criminal Justice System. His book has been named a semi-finalist for the Robert F. Kennedy Book Award. A New York Times editorial praised the book, saying it "should set off alarm bells from the White House to city halls -- and help reverse the notion that we can incarcerate our way out of fundamental social problems."

Mauer said the criminal-justice system has become hotly politicized in the last 30 years and prisoners are now viewed as "commodities." The private-prison industry is "flaming the fire," he said, quoting one brochure touting the private-prison system as a way for investors to "grow profits, maximize investment opportunity in this growing industry."

If current trends continue, Mauer said, 29 percent of African-American children will serve time in prison. He added that four out of every five drug offenses are charged against African American and Latino people.

And Mauer recounted stories of the three-strikes-and-you're-out and other similar rules that led to what he called extreme sentences, such as a 25-year-to-life sentence for a man that stole four cookies during a restaurant break-in because he had prior convictions.

"I don't mean to suggest that people in prisons are there because of cookies and candy bars," he said. But he went on to note that three-quarters of inmates have a history of substance abuse and one out of every six has a mental illness. More than half of female prisoners have a history of sexual abuse.

Mauer said there has been no dramatic drop in crime as a result of high incarceration. "Most of us don't feel much safer than we did 30 years ago," he said.

He also said there is a difference between locking up a "serial rapist," because it brings real safety to the community, and locking up a young adult for selling drugs. Removing one drug dealer from a street corner is unlikely to protect that street corner from other drug dealers, who will soon see that open street corner as a new market. Meanwhile, Mauer said, it will cost the community \$20,000 a year to lock the dealer up for five years.

"Suppose I told a community, 'You take this \$100,000 to help deal with the drug problem,'" Mauer said. "Do they want to waste it all to pick one kid and lock him up?"

Mauer suggested that a better use for the money might be hiring a police officer to patrol the corner 24 hours a day.

Mauer did note some encouraging signs around the country about new ways to address crime. Some law-enforcement officials are asking communities to judge them not by the number of people they jail but the number of problems they solve. He also pointed to a new focus on victims' rights and efforts to use "restorative justice."

Mauer's comments were well received at the ABC biennial meeting where delegates affirmed a statement supporting restorative-justice efforts.

The Statement of Concern on Restorative Justice said while the United States has only 5 percent of the world's population it houses one-quarter of the world's prisoners. "A punitive approach to justice does not effectively address the needs of victims or the community harmed by crime," said the statement.

The delegates described the "biblically based paradigm of restorative justice" that focuses on the relationship between the victim and the offender.

While retributive justice asks, "What law was broken?" the statement noted, restorative justice asks, "What harm has been done by the crime?" Instead of, "Who is responsible for breaking the law?" the new model would ask, "What needs to be done to repair the harm?"

The statement called for victims' rights measures and more mediation programs.

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Hatfield says he won't defect from Republican Party

By Kenny Byrd

PROVIDENCE, R.I. (ABP) -- Former Sen. Mark Hatfield, R-Ore., received the American Baptist Churches esteemed 2001 Edwin T. Dahlberg Peace Award at the June 21-25 biennial gathering of nearly 5,000 ABC delegates.

In an interview with Associated Baptist Press after receiving the award, Hatfield discussed the recent move by Sen. James Jeffords, I-Vt., to swing the Senate to Democratic control.

Hatfield said he would not leave the party, but Jeffords "did the right thing for him." Hatfield said the chair of the Republican Party of Oregon once asked him to leave the party because so many of his votes were against GOP positions, but he refused.

"I was in the party before the swing to the right took place," he said. "I'm not gonna be run out of the party. I'll just stay to irritate them if nothing else."

He encouraged Democrats to not block judicial appointments made by President Bush and said hunger is the nation's No. 1 social problem.

In remarks to the delegates in receiving the award, Hatfield said people "don't have to be in high positions of authority to let our love of Jesus show." He described working for peace as a matter of "letting the Holy Spirit work through us."

Hatfield attends First Baptist Church of Portland, Ore. He lauded the church's outreach program to feed the hungry as "doing what has become the command of our Lord."

In presenting the award, Aidsand Wright-Riggins III, executive director of ABC's National Ministries, praised Hatfield as "a tenacious, articulate and effective peacemaker."

Press releases pointed to Hatfield's work on federal legislation and international treaties advancing peace as well as his co-authoring of the 1999 Oregon statewide initiative to repeal the death penalty.

Also awarded the Dahlberg Peace Award at the biennial was Gordon Bennett, an educator and longtime peace advocate and retired faculty member at Eastern College in St. Davids, Pa. Bennett led efforts to promote nuclear-free zones and joined efforts to end apartheid in South Africa.

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